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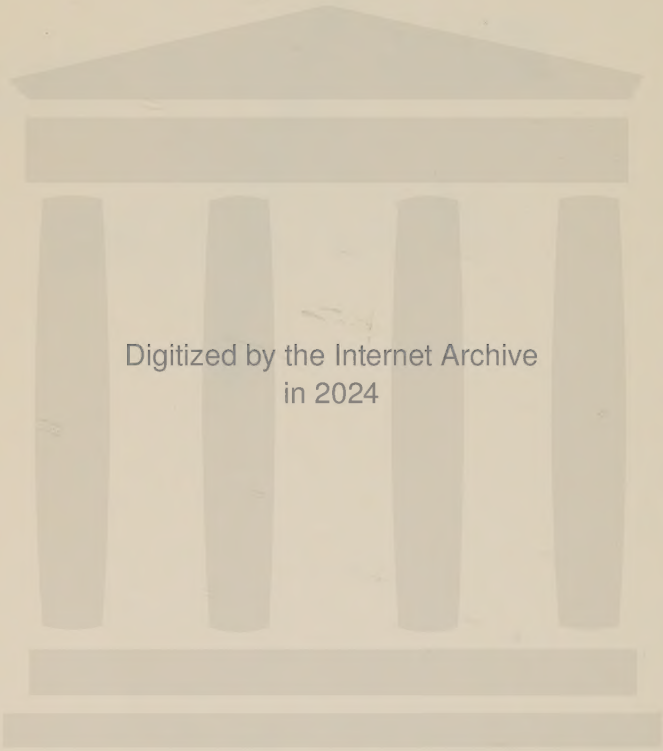
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THE LABOR PHILOSOPHY OF SAMUEL GOMPERS

A KENNIKAT PRESS REISSUE
OF AN AMERICAN HISTORY CLASSIC

* * *

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and

William Tyrrell

THE LABOR PHILOSOPHY OF SAMUEL GOMPERS

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INTRODUCTION

THE Gompers epoch in the history of the American labor movement began in the seventies and eighties. Its end may confidently be placed around the second decade of the present century. This period, encompassing some fifty years in American labor history, may be called an epoch because during it the American labor movement was dominated by a particular and special type of trade unionism; a unionism mostly of crafts, more craft than class conscious, accordingly having no aspiration to control the state; concerned with industry and industrial processes generally only to the extent necessary to wrest from employers higher wages, shorter hours and better working conditions. Superficially it may not seem as though this particular type of union has given up the ghost, or is about to do so. The building trades, the printing trades are still there, pursuing policies and procedures practically identical with those of two or three decades ago. But looking deeper and more closely, is it not apparent that the present decade has brought one defeat after another to this type of unionism; that during this period the American labor movement, dominated by this species of unionism, has become weaker and weaker, and confined to an ever smaller sector of the industrial field? Abroad labor grows more powerful: in England and Australia it has recently assumed the reins of government. In this country the labor movement becomes more and more impotent, less and less important in the life of the nation. It has almost come to the point where one may say that the labor movement in this country will either change its basic philosophy and policies, or there will be no labor movement worth talking about.

This volume, then, deals with the philosophy of a past or

passing epoch in American labor history. This epoch may be called by Gompers' name for certainly Gompers did dominate it. Officially, during the greater part of this period, he was the movement's head. But he was its real leader also. To a very large extent his ideas were the ideas of the trade unionists of his day; his philosophy was the philosophy of the movement. In a very real way he was spokesman for the movement, being thoroughly in tune with it. And not only did he hold and express the philosophy of the movement, but he was part author of that philosophy. During the past thirty years or more, American labor has been living upon the intellectual capital accumulated in the seventies, eighties and early nineties. In the accumulation of that capital, Gompers played a leading rôle. Accordingly this work, as a study of the ideas of Gompers relative to labor and the labor movement, is also a study of the philosophy of the dominant section of the American labor movement during the past fifty years.

By Gompers' philosophy is meant his system of ideas. His philosophy comprises his outlook upon the world in which the labor movement had its being, his basic beliefs with regard to its place and purpose, and his ideas as to the policies and strategy most suitable for achieving that purpose.

It is not adequate, however, simply to tell what Gompers thought. Why he thought what he did is also important; indeed, in many cases it is impossible fully to comprehend what Gompers' ideas were, without understanding also the situations and experiences which caused him to adopt those ideas. Accordingly this study, in dealing with Gompers' ideas and policies, attempts to account for them and to show their origin, and then in so far as his ideas and policies changed through time, to trace their development and the reasons therefor.

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CHAPTER I

The Labor Movement: Its Aims and Program [1]

The labor movement, Gompers would say, is a movement of a class, the working class. The workers are discontented with the conditions under which they live their lives, and they hunger for better things. The labor movement is the attempt on the part of the working class to realize these aspirations. The American Federation of Labor, said Gompers, assuming as always that his organization was entitled to speak for the labor movement of this country, endeavors

> to work along the line of least resistance; to accomplish the best results in improving the conditions of the working people, men, women and children, today, to-morrow and tomorrow's to-morrow, and [making each day] a better day than the one that has gone before. That is the guiding principle and philosophy and aim of the labor movement; in order to secure a better life for all.[2]

After Gompers had made the above statement, Morris Hillquit, who was cross-examining him, asked him what the underlying standards were by which judgment could be rendered as to what was better. He replied:

> Does it require much discernment to know that a wage of $3.00 a day and a work day of eight hours a day in sanitary work

[1] After the war certain changes took place in Gompers' ideas as to the aims and program of the movement. These will be dealt with in the following chapter.

[2] U. S. Commission on Industrial Relations of 1912: *Final Report and Testimony*, vol. ii, p. 1528.

shops are all better than $2.50 a day and twelve hours a day and under perilous conditions of labor?

Mr. Hillquit: Then, Mr. Gompers, by the same parity of reasoning, $4.00 a day and seven hours a day of work and very attractive working conditions are still better.

Mr. Gompers: Unquestionably . . . the best possible conditions obtainable for the workers is the aim.

Mr. Hillquit: Yes, and when these (last named) conditions are obtained—

Mr. Gompers: (interrupting) Why, then, we want better.

Mr. Hillquit: (continuing) You will strive for better.

Mr. Gompers: Yes . . . the working people will never stop in their effort to obtain a better life for themselves and their wives and for their children and for humanity.[1]

The aim of the labor movement is, as he so often expressed it, " more, more, more, now." But not only does the working class desire to secure " more " in an absolute sense, that is, more wages for fewer hours under more attractive working conditions, but it aims at bettering its conditions in relation to the rest of the community. Essentially, the labor movement is a movement of the working class to appropriate for itself a larger share of the national income.

The workers of the United States do not receive the full product of their labor. It is impossible for anyone to say definitely what proportion the workers receive in payment for their labor, but due to the organized labor movement they have received and are receiving a larger share of the product of their labor than ever before in the history of modern industry. One of the functions of organized labor is to increase the share of the workers in the product of their labor. Organized labor makes constantly increasing demands upon society for rewards for the services which the workers give to society. . . .

The working people are pressing forward, making their

[1] U. S. Commission on Industrial Relations of 1912, *op. cit.*, p. 1529.

demands and presenting their claims with whatever power they can exercise in a natural, normal manner to secure a larger and constantly increasing share of what they produce.[1]

"More" for the working class as a whole, then, was Gompers' aim, at least so he said. But he was the leader of an organization representative not of the whole working class but only of a portion of it, a portion composed of groups each of which fought for "more" for itself only, without much regard to whether that "more" might mean less for other organized or unorganized workers. In reality, then, was Gompers concerned exclusively with the advancement of the organized section of the workers? Was it only for these that he demanded "more"? In a sense, yes. But it was also his belief and hope that all labor would some day be organized. Indeed, it was his opinion that organized labor must bring organization to the remainder of the working class in order to protect its own gains:

Its existence (the A. F. of L.) is founded upon economic law, to wit: That no particular trade can long maintain wages above the common level; that to maintain high wages all trades and callings must be organized; that the lack of organization among the unskilled vitally affects the organized skilled; that general organization of skilled and unskilled can only be accomplished by united action.[2]

A CLASS STRUGGLE

Given the purpose of the labor movement, it follows that the interests of workers as a class and employers as a class are fundamentally in opposition.

Because employers as a class are interested in maintaining

[1] Gompers, S., *The American Labor Movement, Its Makeup, Achievements and Aspirations*, A. F. of L. Pamphlet, 1914, p. 20.

[2] Gompers, S., *Labor Omnia Vincit*, A. F. of L. Pamphlet.

or increasing their share of the general product, and because workers are determined to demand a greater and ever greater share of this same general product, the economic interests between these two are not harmonious. Upon this point I have been repeatedly misrepresented by socialist writers or orators whose frequent repetitions of that misrepresentation have finally convinced them of the truth of their assertion. . . .

From my earliest understanding of the conditions that prevail in the industrial world, I have been convinced and I have asserted that the economic interests of the employing class and those of the working class are not harmonious. That has been my position ever since—never changed in the slightest. There are times when for temporary purposes, interests are reconciliable; but they are temporary only.[1]

What the workers have gained up to this time has never been handed to them "upon a silver platter." They have had to struggle and fight continually in order to wrest better terms from their employers.

Employers, capitalists, stockholders, bondholders,—the capitalistic class generally—oppose the efforts of the workers in the American Federation of Labor and in other organizations to obtain a larger share of the product. Very much of the opposition to the efforts of the working people to secure improved conditions has come from those who obtain what may be called an unearned share in the distribution. The beneficiaries of the present system of distribution desire to retain as much as possible of their share or to increase that proportion.[2]

It would seem then that the working class was engaged in what the socialists call the "class struggle." Before 1900 Gompers firmly held this view. For instance, in 1899, in testifying before the United States Industrial Commission of that year, he said:

[1] *The American Labor Movement, op. cit.*, p. 23.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 22.

I believe that as time goes on the wage earners will continue to become larger sharers per dollar of the wealth produced. . . . This morning I indicated the fact that there is a constant struggle between the wealth possessors and those who produce wealth, and that struggle has manifested itself in different forms at different times in different countries. That struggle has continued up to date and will continue so long as there are divergent interests between the two.[1]

Later on, as Gompers became more hostile toward socialism and the socialists, he rarely used the term, and even denied that labor was engaged in a "class struggle." This was because that term as used by the socialists had certain connotations which he disliked. In the first place the aim of the socialist class struggle was the overthrow of capitalism and the substitution therefor of socialism. The American working class, according to Gompers, while struggling to better its conditions, professed no such aim. Nor did Gompers agree with the premises of that concept. A realist, he perceived that while a line did divide workers from employers as a class, that line was oftentimes faint, and that there was no such solidarity of class among either the workers or employers as that concept predicated. Also, he recognized that while the interests of employers and workers conflicted in some respects, in other respects there was an identity of interests, and this being so, he was quite willing to cooperate or collaborate with employers to further these mutual interests. His cooperation with the government and employers during the war, and his advocacy of union-management cooperation after the war are illustrations of this. Perhaps, however, the step of Gompers which in the eyes of the socialists constituted his most flagrant violation of what the class struggle demanded was his joining the National Civic Fed-

[1] U. S. Industrial Commission of 1899, *Report on the Relations of Capital and Labor*, vol. vii, p. 644.

eration. This body, composed chiefly of employers, was ostensibly formed with the purpose of promoting more peaceable industrial relations. What were actually the dominating motives remains unknown, except that some writers have suggested that it was formed to unite the conservative unionists with the employers against the rising tide of socialism. Be that as it may, Gompers took this body at its face value, and joined with the idea of carrying on missionary work for unionism among the employers. He would, he testified upon one occasion, "appeal to the devil, or his mother-in-law, to help Labor, if Labor could be aided in that way." [1]

ULTIMATE ENDS

Very early in his trade-union career, Gompers had been a socialist. But by the eighties his socialist creed had been relegated to the background, and by 1900 he had become intensely hostile to socialism. Having thus put away his socialist convictions as to the ultimate aim of the labor movement, Gompers replaced that aim with no alternative. It was not the aim of the American trade-union movement, he averred, to displace the existing order, to get rid of private enterprise. Another ten cents an hour, another half-hour cut off the working day, better conditions, these immediate objectives, comprised the totality of his program. The question of the day after tomorrow, of the trade unions in the future, he neither asked nor answered. What the future might bring forth he did not know, nor did he feel any urge to prophesy. He did know that the existing order was changing. For the present, he said, let us go on fighting for higher and higher wages, and leave the problems of the future to be cared for in the future. The following statement, made in 1900, expressed fully his attitude.

[1] *The American Labor Movement, op. cit.*, p. 27.

Mr. Clark: You believe in the wage system, then, rather than in partnership.

Mr. Gompers: I cannot [assent] to that. I know we are operating under the wage system. As to what system will ever come to take its place, I am not prepared to say. I have given the subject much thought. I have read the works of the most advanced economists, competent economists in all schools of thought, the trade unionist, the socialist, the anarchist, the single taxer, the cooperationist, etc. I am not prepared to say, after having read and with an honest endeavor to arrive at a conclusion—I am not prepared to say that either of their propositions are logical, scientific or natural. I know that we are living under the wage system and so long as that lasts, it is our purpose to secure a continually larger share for labor, for the wealth producers. Whether the time shall come as this constantly increasing share to labor goes on when profits shall be entirely eliminated and the full product of labor, the net result of production, go to the laborer, thus abolishing the wage system, or whether on the other hand through the theory of the anarchist there should be an abolition of all title in land other than its occupation and use, the abolition of the patent system—whether we will return to first principles; or whether under the single tax, taxing the land to the full value of it—I am perfectly willing that the future shall determine and work out. I know that as the workers become more thoroughly organized and continually become larger sharers in the product of their toil, they will have the better opportunities for their physical and mental cultivation instilled into them, higher hopes and aspirations and they will be better prepared to meet the problems that will confront them. For the present it is our purpose to secure better conditions and instill a larger amount of manhood and independence into the hearts and minds of the workers and to broaden their mental sphere. . . . [1]

But though he believed that for the present it was best to limit the program of the movement to wages, hours, and con-

[1] U. S. Industrial Commission; *op. cit.*, p. 645.

ditions, i.e., to business unionism, he believed also, as can be seen from the statement above, that these things would not comprise the aims of the trade-union movement forever. One discerns here and there in his speeches and writings a quiet faith that the future would belong to the working class, that in the future, by some program of which he knows not, all power will be to labor, that labor will control industry. Thus, in speaking of the trusts, he says:

> Experience will demonstrate that there is a power growing wholly unnoticed by our superficial friends of the press which will prove itself far more potent to deal with the trusts, or if the trusts inherently possess any virtue at all, to see that they are directed into a channel for the public good, and that growing power is the much despised organized labor movement of our country and our time. Wait and see.[1]

Gompers disapproved of the anti-trust laws. He believed that the political state was incapable of controlling economic evolution, that it could not prevent industrial concentration and the growth of trusts. It not only could not, but it should not. He thought the trusts ought to be left alone. His attitude was strengthened by the idea that if the law left intact combinations of employers it would be less likely to interfere with combinations of workers.

Three years later in a statement that smacks strongly of the Marxism which he absorbed in his youth, he said:

> The great wrongs attributable to the trust are their corrupting influence on the politics of the country, but as the state has always been the representative of the wealth possessors, we shall be compelled to endure this evil until the toilers are organized and educated to the degree that they shall know that the state is by right theirs, and finally and justly shall come into their own, while never relaxing in their efforts to secure the

[1] Editorial, *American Federationist*, December, 1896, p. 217.

very best economic, social and material improvement in their conditions.[1]

Never was a Utopia more bare of details. As for the route to this heaven, he believed with his whole soul that it lay at the end of that road of which trade unionism, aiming at higher wages, shorter hours, etc. is the beginning.

Trade Unionism [he said] is the soundest base yet laid for every project that gives promise to the working class for a firm and solid advance. Moving step by step, trade unionism contains within itself, as a movement and as a mechanism, the possibilities for establishing whatever social institutions the future shall develop for the workers as the predestined universal element in control of society.[2]

As for socialism, that was one direction in which Gompers did not wish the economic system to evolve. Socialism would not be an improvement over present conditions. If introduced it would create "the most pernicious system for circumscribing effort and activity that has ever been invented."[3] Liberty and freedom would be lost under socialism. "Our main dependence," he believed, "lies in individual initiative."[4] To much of the social legislation proposed by the socialists he was opposed. Their program entailed giving to the government greater control and authority over economic life. This tendency he fought.

In the literature of the American Labor Movement it is often said that Gompers accepted capitalism and bargained with it. Usually this statement comes from the socialists. To these people, believing that the essence of socialism was

[1] American Federation of Labor: *Convention Proceedings*, 1899, p. 15.

[2] American Federation of Labor: *Convention Proceedings*, 1910, p. 17.

[3] *The American Labor Movement, op. cit.*, p. 20.

[4] Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor* (New York, 1925), vol. ii, p. 24.

the nationalization of industry, it was as clear as day that Gompers, in refusing to give adherence to their program, and after 1900, say, definitely opposing it, was necessarily acccepting capitalism. From their point of view they were quite right. Certainly many of Gompers' statements seem to indicate an acceptance of capitalism. For instance, in 1913 we find him saying:

> Without egotism and I hope little if any vanity, I will say I came to the conclusion many years ago that it is our duty to live our lives as workers in the society in which we live, and not to work for the downfall or the destruction, or the overthrow of that society, but for its fuller development and evolution.[1]

A more explicit statement is found in an editorial written a few months before he died.

> The American Federation of Labor is at all times critical of our economic order, seeking always for improvement, for a larger measure of justice, for a greater degree of perfection in functioning. But the A. F. of L. stands squarely and unequivocally for the defense and maintenance of the existing order and for its development and improvement. Therein lies the sharp distinction between the A. F. of L. and the revolutionists. Therein also lies the sharp distinction between the A. F. of L. and the bourbons and the reactionaries . . . who believe that all is well with the world and that all change and modification are evil.[2]

Earlier statements differ from these only in tone. They are less conservative; they show more dissatisfaction with the existing order. But they do not declare that the aim of the trade-union movement is to displace the existing order.

[1] Testimony before House Lobby Investigating Committee; quoted in Gompers, *Labor and the Common Welfare* (New York), p. 193.

[2] Editorial, *American Federationist*, June, 1924, p. 481.

On closer and more realistic inspection, however, this acceptance on Gompers' part of the existing order largely vanishes into thin air. Take, for instance, his attitude towards private property. The American Labor movement, Gompers said in an important editorial, has no quarrel with private property or the private ownership of industry: "It does not seek to overthrow private property. It regards private property as a necessary agency for securing opportunity for individual independence and resourcefulness." [1] Having thus "accepted" private property, he then goes on to say that the American labor movement wishes "to safeguard private property for use by preventing the perversion of property as an agency purely for exploitation and individual aggrandizement in order to establish an autocracy." In the same editorial, he says that the eternal problem of the trade-union movement is "control of property, to bring property into such relations to human life that it shall serve and not injure."

These statements simply reflect the trite fact that trade unions do control the property of employers; that the private property of an employer, as represented by his privilege to run his business as he sees fit, is a very different thing after, as compared with before, organization of his employees. In short, any idea that the trade unions accept private property as it now exists is nonsense.

Akin to his "acceptance" of the institution of private property is his "acceptance" of the legitimacy of interest and profits as charges upon industry. He says:

> The full value of production does not go to the actual working men today. A portion goes to investment, superintendence, agencies for the creation of wants among people, and many other factors. Some of these are legitimate factors in industry entitled to reward, but many should be eliminated. The legitimate factors are superintendence, the creation of wants,

[1] *American Federationist*, Nov., 1916, p. 1037.

administration, returns for investment, in so far as it is honest investment and does not include watered stock or inflated holdings.[1]

However, although profits and interest are a legitimate charge upon industry, a portion of the dividends and interest payments distributed by corporations, he goes on to say, constitutes an unfair distribution. "The owners, stockholders, and bondholders of modern corporations receive from this distribution an unearned income which is taken from the product of the labor of those who produce it."[2] After Gompers had said this before the Industrial Relations Commission of 1912, Hillquit endeavored to secure from him a more explicit statement. But what the unfair portion of this distribution was, or by what means other than through the securing of higher and higher wages the workers could prevent the distribution of that portion, Gompers would not or could not say.

> Honest investment [he reiterated] is entitled to its reward.
> What is honest investment? [he was asked].
> An honest investment [he replied] is an honest, actual, physical investment. . . . An honest man knows what is an honest investment.[3]

It was rather evident that upon these questions Gompers had never pressed his thoughts. Certainly he never interested himself in the securing of any law which would distinguish "honest" from "dishonest" investment, or by which profits could be limited. His position, then, was that the income streams labeled interest and profits were legitimate, but bulked too large. Labor intended to reduce them by the

[1] *The American Labor Movement, op. cit.*, p. 22.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 23.

[3] U. S. Commission on Industrial Relations of 1912, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, pp. 1531-2.

gradual appropriation of a larger share of industry's product in the form of higher wages.

So, stockholders and bondholders were entitled to share in the industrial product, irrespective of personal services. But at the same time, he was committed to waging war upon these income streams, to lessening their volume as compared with the income going to the wage-earning class. Nor did Gompers set any limits to the demands of his class. Labor, he thought, should demand, fight for, and secure a larger and larger share of the product of industry. This would mean, if labor's aims were realized, a progressive diminution in the relative size of profits and interests. Ultimately might not profits and interests be removed entirely? But does a movement that in its actions fights interest and profits, and intends progressively to whittle them away, "accept" interest and profits?

The crux of the matter is the definition one gives to capitalism and socialism. One may define capitalism, as has been the orthodox usage in the past, as the private ownership of the means of production, and socialism [1] as the collective ownership of the means of production. If this is done, then of course it is correct to say that Gompers accepted capitalism and sought to win "more" within this system. On the other hand, as has lately been the tendency, capitalism may be defined as a quality present in the existing economic system, that is, the concentration of income and power, the control of industry by a few, and socialism as the opposite of this condition. From this viewpoint it may not be a prerequisite of socialism that the state take over the ownership of industry.[2] From this conception is it not obvious that a move-

[1] Because Gompers considered socialism to mean the collective ownership of the means of production, it is this definition that is used throughout this work, except in the following few paragraphs.

[2] G. D. H. Cole, a prominent intellectual of the British Labor Party, has reconsidered his socialism in a recent book, *The Next Ten Years of*

ment of the organized workers, demanding more and ever more, is anti-capitalist in fact, by its nature, whatever it may say in its declarations? Social groups are dynamic entities. They constantly seek to extend their power at the cost of and over other groups. And in extending their power they change social institutions so as to make them favorable to themselves. Trade unionism itself, as Hardman puts it, is an exercise in power accumulation.[1] The very attainment of organization and the securing of a collective agreement constitutes a veritable revolution in status, both for workers and employers. By that single step, the workers have enormously increased their own power at the cost of the employers. Thereafter they seek to extend that power and to "constitutionalize" it. The effect of their ever-expanding demands is to shift more power to themselves, to absorb the power of the employer, and to restrict his control of industry. A union, therefore, is not anti-capitalistic merely because it prefaces its constitution with a preamble stating that it aims to overthrow the existing order. Nor does a union accept capitalism in saying that it does. Rather, by the very logic of its nature and function, a strong union is anti-capitalistic, and changes the existing order in its day-to-day activities, and a weak union cannot be anything else than conservative. Inherently the demand for more, coming from the working class, is a radical one and subversive to the existing order. The mild demands of the leaders of the unions do not express, they cover up the radicalism of the movement they lead.

British Social and Economic Policy. He arrives at the conclusion that socialism is "the extension of some kind of effective social control over the economic system as a whole, and over all such parts of it as vitally affect the conduct of the whole". "Perhaps," he says, "we shall find that we no longer want to 'nationalize' any industry at all, in quite the old sense." (pp. 133-4).

[1] Hardman, J. B. S., article in *American Labor Dynamics*, edited by himself (New York, 1928), p. 104.

This has been well expressed by William Z. Foster. He writes:

It is an indisputable fact that the trade unions always act upon the policy of taking all they can get from their exploiters. They even overreach themselves sometimes, as a thousand lost strikes eloquently testify. Their program is directly anti-capitalistic. . . . So far as the tendency of their demands is concerned, there can be no question about that to anyone who will look at them squarely; the trade unions may be depended upon always to check exploitation through the wage system so far as their power enables them. The big question is whether or not they will be able to develop enough power to stop exploitation altogether. . . . They, like various other aggressive social movements, have more or less instinctively surrounded themselves with a sort of camouflage or protective coloring, designed to disguise the movement and thus to pacify and disarm the opposition. This is the function of such expressions as a "fair day's pay for a fair day's work", "the interests of capital and labor are identical," etc. In actual practice little or no attention is paid to them. They are for foreign consumption. The fact that those who utter them may actually believe what they say does not change the situation a particle. Most movements are blind to their own goals anyway. The important thing is the real trend of the movement which is indisputably . . . on the one hand constantly expanding organization, and on the other constantly increasing demands. The trade unions will not become anti-capitalistic through the conversion of their members to a certain point of view or by the adoption of certain preambles, they are that by their very make-up and methods.[1]

From this angle it is clearly seen that Gompers' program in spite of all his fulminations against socialism and his protestations of loyalty to the existing order is definitely anti-capitalistic. The demand for "more, more, more" to

[1] *The Great Steel Strike and its Lessons*, pp. 257-9. Quoted in Hardman, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

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be secured within the existing order becomes, as that demand is pressed, a contradiction in terms. On the other hand, it may be said that Gompers' set of ways and means for securing "more" is, compared with the British Labor Movement for example, narrow and restricted. British labor has faced more frankly the implications of that "more", and in addition to its trade unionism has evolved a comprehensive legislative program looking to the control of industry and the re-distribution of the national income in the interests of the working class.

Gompers in his refusal to pose for the movement any objectives beyond collective bargaining and higher wages, etc., was severely criticised by the socialists, chiefly, of course, because he rejected their ideas, but also on the ground that in doing so he held to no philosophy of the labor movement, that he was working blindly from day to day. Gompers made various answers to this criticism, but common to them all was his insistence that the movement had to be practical. The movement, he said, had to concern itself with questions here and now, with bread-and-butter matters; it declined to, it could not afford to, deal with theories. First things first, he said. Let the future take care of the problems of the future. In fact, reading through what he said and wrote, one discerns a positive aversion to considering other than the most practical and concrete matters, a repugnance for speculating about the meaning of the movement, for thinking about where the movement was going, for looking behind that word "more." Probably part of this, consciously or unconsciously, was due to his fear lest the stating of advanced objectives might make more difficult the winning of steps next ahead. It has already been pointed out how some of his statements tended to gloss over the radicalism of the movement. But part of this aversion and distaste for "ideas", for thinking about ultimate ends of the movement,

was undoubtedly due to his personal nature. He was a practical man, a fighter, a man of action, not a philosopher. At any rate, probably as a result of these factors, Gompers erected his distaste for "ideas" into a virtue. The labor movement, he repeatedly said, has got to be practical. It requires no philosophy, it ought not to have one. For a while, during the latter nineties and the following decade, " no philosophy " became with his help the official philosophy of the movement.

INTELLECTUALS

Along with Gompers' emphasis upon the " practical " and his distaste of theory came an anti-intellectualism, and a distrust of outsiders and " intellectuals " who sought to attach themselves to the labor movement. Both these prejudices were fully shared by most of the other leaders of the Federation. The labor movement, Gompers believed, must depend upon its own efforts for advancement; it must guard itself against those who, belonging to a different class, seek to help the movement from above, or to advise it.

> The labor movement [he says] must be guarded not only against enemies but its misguided friends. It is a movement of wage earners, for wage earners, by wage earners, and it may not be amiss to warn even the well intentioned, the " so-called intellectuals ", the " saviors of labor " who would dominate the labor movement with their panaceas or destroy it, that they had better watch out.[1]

This attitude of Gompers had its chief origin in his early contacts with middle-class reformers who had no use for trade unionism, and in his conflict with socialists who attempted to capture the Federation for socialism, but his distrust and hatred of these people gradually spread out and encompassed all intellectuals, friends of labor, wel-

[1] Editorial, *American Federationist*, November, 1915, p. 974.

fare workers, research experts.[1] They were in one camp; Gompers and the Federation in another. The intellectuals, being mostly socialists, thought Gompers' trade unionism narrow and conservative, and lacking in ideals. They freely criticized the American Federation of Labor, and made invidious comparisons between it and the enlightened labor movements of England and the continent. On the other hand, Gompers was prone to doubt the sincerity of these people, to say that they were "careerists", "faddists", "professional friends of labor." If not that, then they were disqualified by reasons of incompetency. It seemed to be his attitude that only wage earners could know and understand the problems of wage earners; that only those actually in the unions could formulate policies for the labor movement:

> The labor movement does not discount the service to civilization rendered by intellectual ability, but it is equally convinced that there is a vast supply of important fundamental knowledge that can be secured only through the slow accumulation of deduction from experience. In understanding and solving labor problems, information gained in the college lecture room or in doctrinaire discussions is not a substitute for the knowledge gained through solving labor problems in the shop, in the mill or in the mine. Intellectuals usually suspend their labor programs from sky hooks. Their practical efforts are confined to criticizing the achievement and methods of workingmen. They can find nothing good in the practical structure of labor organization which workers have built upon solid foundations resting upon the ground where labor problems exist and extending upward as far as the foundation structure will sustain.[2]

[1] However in his later years, especially after the war, this prejudice of Gompers softened somewhat, and he became more friendly towards "intellectuals", especially those who because of the war and the Russian revolution had become anti-socialist.

[2] Editorial, *American Federationist*, May, 1918, p. 394.

There was still another element in his distrust of these people. The very idea of labor being helped from above he thought bad. Labor, he believed, had to work out its own salvation.

Permanent changes and progress must come from within man. You can't save people, they must save themselves.[1]

Again:

Doing for people what they can and ought to do for themselves is a dangerous experiment. In the last analysis the welfare of the workers depends upon their own initiative. Whatever is done under the guise of philanthropy or social morality which in any way lessens initiative is the greatest crime that can be committed against the toilers. Let the social busy-bodies and professional "public moral experts" in their fads reflect upon the perils they rashly invited under the pretense of social welfare.

METHODS

I am a trade unionist here, [Gompers said in 1905] for the same reason that I would be a trade unionist in Great Britain, for the same reason that I would be a revolutionist in Russia.

. . . In Russia without the freedom of speech or of the press, the thoughts of the discontented must find their vent somewhere or somehow . . .

We are trade unionists in the United States because opportunities are afforded for free association, for free speech, the free assemblage and the free press, and because we have these guarantees of freedom, we find in our movement in the United States the opportunity for evolution rather than revolution.[2]

It was his belief that the workers in seeking to advance

[1] Gompers, *The Workers and the Eight Hour Day*, A. F. of L. Pamphlet, 1915.

[2] From an address at meeting of Plate Printers Union, No. 2, Washington, D. C., January, 1905. Quoted in *Labor and the Common Welfare*, p. 14.

must choose their tactics and methods with a nice regard for all of the elements of the situation in which they live. But very early he had come to the opinion, an opinion which later took on the nature of dogma, that in this and other industrialized countries, the trade unions were the only really worthwhile instruments by which the working class might progress to better things.

By organizing into trade unions, the workers secure economic power, and it is economic power that counts. "Economic power is the basis upon which may be developed power in other fields. It is the foundation of organized society. Whosoever or whatever controls economic power directs and shapes development for the group or nation." [1] Basic economic changes cannot be effected through legislation. Beyond a certain point the political state cannot control the development of industry. Nor can political power be attained without economic power. "It is ridiculous to imagine", he once said, "that the wage workers can be slaves in employment and yet achieve control at the polls. There never yet existed coincident with each other autocracy in the shop and democracy in political life." [2] But, "in the same degree that the workers muster a greater influence in the conditions and regulations under which they are employed, will their associated voices be heard and heeded in the halls of legislation; their will be the will of the people." [3]

Holding to this premise, Gompers urged that the movement generally abstain from political activity as much as possible; that it engage in political activity only to attain ends that could not be otherwise attained. Following these precepts, the movement's chief preoccupation with politics has been to secure such legislation as would assure the legal right to or-

[1] *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, vol. i, p. 287.

[2] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1894, p. 14.

[3] *Ibid.*, 1896, p. 14.

ganize and to carry on the activities incidental to economic organization, i.e., strike, picket, boycott, etc.

The type of trade unionism that Gompers stood for may be indicated but briefly, since it is so largely a matter of common knowledge. Stripped of verbiage, that unionism was largely of the nature of a business device. It was a combination of workers effected so as to rule out price competition for jobs, and thus raise the price of labor. If the employers were unwilling to concede the terms which the workers collectively demanded, there was nothing else but to do as other sellers do, that is, to strike. Other measures of bringing pressure to bear upon the employer to force him to concede better terms were the boycott, and the union label. Once the employer agreed to the terms demanded, then these terms were written into the trade agreement or contract and were to be held to for a specified time. Gompers always preached the sanctity of these contracts. To make the union an effective fighting force, Gompers counseled high dues and the accumulating of large strike funds. To bind members to the union, and thus to insure stability, he advised the institution of benefit features.

The mission of this unionism was to sell labor at the highest possible price and that was about all. To control the labor of industry, not to control industry, was, Gompers believed, the function of a trade union.[1] The control and management of industry was the province and business of the employers. As for production, nowhere in Gompers' speeches or writings before the war is there a hint or even a suggestion of a hint that the unions should concern themselves with industrial production or assume any responsibility for efficiency.

[1] However after the war, as will be pointed out in the next chapter, Gompers expanded his ideas as to the function of the union.

CHAPTER II

The Labor Movement—Its Aims and Program
[*Continued*]

The preceding chapter outlined the ideas held by Gompers before the war as to the aims and program of the labor movement. The gist of them is that the aims of the labor movement were better wages, hours and conditions. These ends were to be obtained by the method of business unionism, and within the framework of the existing order, which order it was not the aim of the labor movement to overthrow. Nor, he held, did labor have any aspiration to share with the employer, much less take over, the control of industry. These ideas and policies Gompers held to during the major portion of his life as a trade-union leader, and it is with these that his name is and will be associated.

However, during the course of the war and post-war years, some of Gompers' ideas changed. In many respects he seemed to have become more conservative. The edge of his belligerency was less sharp than before. Perhaps it was merely because he was getting old, and recoiled from the prospect of strife. Or perhaps it was that, having worked along hand in hand with the government during the war, he found it hard afterwards to go against the current. His denunciations of Soviet Russia, the rabidness of his attacks upon communism and socialism, his rampant nationalism, his fervid protestations of loyalty to "American institutions", all seemed evidence of a drift to the right. But at the same time, Gompers, in company with the labor movement, broke the bounds of his old program and extended the aims of trade unionism beyond wages and hours. It is with this revision and extension of his program that this

chapter concerns itself. But first, the various developments of those years in industry and the labor movement which form the background for this widening of ideas must be briefly indicated.

The war was being fought to " save democracy ". During the war that concept began to be applied to industry. It was said that existing relationships between employers and employees were autocratic and ought to be democratized. The term meant many things to many people, but in certain sections of the labor movement as the term was used its content broadened so that it meant something more than collective bargaining.

The war, also, focused attention upon production, and upon the " lag, leak and friction " in industry. Labor, becoming conscious of the relationship between industrial efficiency and wages, began to be interested in production.[1]

Another outcome of the war was that it added tremendously to the power of labor. Helped by an acute shortage of workers, by fast-rising prices and by a sympathetic administration at Washington, the unions increased their membership by leaps and bounds. Also the Federation, in return for its support of the war, was granted a recognition and a voice in the conducting of affairs beyond anything it had formerly dreamed. The appetite for power grew with the eating, and as its power increased, so did the movement expand its demands.

Then in 1919, 1920 and 1921, embraced in the wave of

[1] Labor's interest in production was stimulated by other factors after 1921. Then the movement found its position precarious in some industries already organized, and its entrance to the great basic industries blocked by huge corporations with almost unlimited resources. As a consequence, the offer of cooperation with management for increasing production, was in part, a way of making organization seem less unattractive to employers—a quid pro quo for organization and opportunity to organize.

world-wide radicalism, the movement swung to the left and the old leaders found themselves sitting on the lid of a widespread rank and file radicalism. In 1919 there were strikes engaging some 4,000,000 workers. In spite of the disapproval of Federation leaders, general strikes occurred in Seattle and Winnepeg. During these years, in a number of organizations the men defied their leaders and went out on outlaw strikes. There was much talk of an independent labor party, and a number of attempts to establish one. That a very large section of the movement was ready for new departures and the playing of a larger rôle, and was restive under the hands of the conservative Gompers' administration was clearly evidenced at the 1920 convention. The high point of that convention was the endorsement of the Plumb Plan, a plan sponsored by the various railway unions which provided for government ownership of the railroads and their " democratic management " by a board representative of the workers, the technical management and the government. Gompers strongly opposed its endorsement on the grounds that it was socialistic, that the workers would be deprived of the right to strike, and that although he would yield to no one in loyalty to the government of the United States, " he would not give it more power over the individual citizenship of (his) country." [1] But the convention in this matter rode over him roughshod and overwhelmingly gave its approval to the Plan. Gompers himself recognized that the Federation possessed a new temper, that it was ready to push off from his and its established policies. This was signalized in an interesting manner when, after his reelection, he assured the convention that although he was an old dog, he could still learn new tricks, that he was not impervious to new ideas.[2]

At the 1921 convention, the Federation endorsed the min-

[1] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1920, p. 417.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 443.

ers' demand for nationalization and democratic management of the mines. Also, at this convention, the rebellion against Gompers' policies was indicated by the existence of a strong opposition and the rival candidature of Lewis. This opposition, of which the miners, the machinists and railway unions formed the nucleus, was more progressive and radical than the administration, as shown by their support of the Plumb Plan and the nationalization of the mines; they favored wider political demands, and a more vigorous political activity, if not an independent labor party; they represented the industrial as against the craft principle of organization, and would have pressed for consolidation of the movement through amalgamations. In general, they regarded the administration, as Hillquit had put it some years before, as "somewhat archaic, somewhat antiquated, too conservative and not efficient enough for the objects and purposes of the American Federation of Labor." [1]

The Gompers machine, by astute manoevering, defeated Lewis, thus enabling Gompers to fulfill his ambition of being president of the federation until he died. By 1922 the swing towards radicalism had been reversed, and by the following year the Plumb Plan and the miners' demand for nationalization of the mines had become ancient history.

But the movement has not slipped back to its pre-war mentality. Quite the contrary. During those years, as Hardman says, labor made one significant stride, that is, "the evolution of the labor mind from viewing wages and hours as its sole concern and collective bargaining as its sole aim, to the bidding for a progressive share in the proceeds of industry and a voice in industrial management." [2]

Gompers, having put down the opposition, took over some of the planks in its program, though placing a different label

[1] Hillquit, Gompers and Hayes: *The Double Edge of Labor's Sword*; Pamphlet issued by Socialist Party, 1914, p. 46.

[2] Hardman, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

on them. Having perceived where the main body of labor was tending, he placed himself at the head of the procession and helped lead it to this new orientation. He became spokesman for the movement in its new philosophy. But at the same time he gave that new philosophy a definite anti-political slant that was somewhat unrepresentative of the views of the Federation as a whole.[1] Also, in some respects the new conception pointed in the direction of guild socialism; but Gompers in setting it forth carefully avoided giving it a radical or socialist name tag, in fact, outlined it all with but scant trace of bellicosity. And all the while he continued to advocate *laissez-faire* and to excoriate socialism and communism throughout the length and breadth of the land.

The central note of Gompers' extended program is that of economic democracy as the ideal towards which the labor movement strives. At present, industry is organized on an autocratic basis. Labor seeks to democratize it. Thus, in his last speech at the 1925 convention, when a foreboding of death made him wish every word to be significant, he said:

> Today in our own country and in the other democratic countries there is, to a larger or smaller degree, an autocracy of what has come to be known as capitalism: in other words, the opposite extreme of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the dictatorship of wealth, of employers, of profiteers, of the possessors of material things. The only influence of power which challenges this employers' autocracy and dictatorship is the American Labor movement, the democratic labor movement of our country and all other democratic industrial countries. . . . [2]

Democracy now exists in political government. But democracy in industry is as justified as democracy in political government, and even more important. Gompers thus put the argument:

[1] Walling, W. E., *American Labor and American Democracy* (New York, 1928), vol. ii, pp. 105-112.

[2] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1924, p. 256.

The formation of unions is the expression on the part of the workers of a feeling which seems to me to be close kindred of the feeling which possessed men who first battled against the control of political institutions by the few, and the exclusion from political expression of the many. If there is any truth at all in democracy, if democracy has any real justification, it is as thoroughly justified in our industrial life as it ever was in our political life.

I am sure it must occur to you that our relations in industry are fully as important in our life as our relations in the realm of political affairs. Decisions which are made and conditions which are confronted in industry are of infinitely greater moment to thousands upon thousands of people than all the political decisions and conditions in the country. Justification for democratic practices and the consideration of democratic rights in industry, it seems to me, is most emphatically equal to the justification of those things in political life. If this is true, there can be absolutely no justification for employers to believe that they ought to be the sole judges of the manner in which those democratic rights are to be exercised, or even of what are those democratic rights. The moment the first principle is accepted, the whole structure of employer superiority and domination has got to disappear. The problem must then be looked at as one in which the workers have a voice, not under somebody else's terms and under somebody else's restrictions, but on terms of equality.[1]

Gompers recognized that the application of the principle of democracy to industry was one which resulted in conceptions that were truly revolutionary.

Beyond doubt [he continues], the principle which I have set up, if carried to its logical conclusion, would carry much beyond that for which workers contend at present. That surely cannot be used as an argument against that for which workers now

[1] Gompers, *Correspondence with Newton D. Baker*, A. F. of L. Pamphlet, 1923, p. 24.

contend. It speaks rather for the moderation of American labor, and its desire to function constructively, without doing anything to risk the structure in which I am sure we must all live for a considerable time to come.[1]

That the aim of the labor movement goes beyond wages, hours and collective bargaining to the achievement of democracy in industry was officially declared in 1923, when the convention of that year adopted the declaration entitled "Industry's Manifest Duty". Gompers was author of that manifesto.[2]

We feel [it states] that the hour has struck for a pronouncement of the aims of labor that shall more nearly express the full implications of trade unionism than has yet been undertaken in these annual reports. . . . .

What we have observed is that the period ending with the beginning of the World War found political democracy in its fullest state of development while the close of that period of overwhelming upheaval marked the opening of the period of intelligent demand and living need for industrial democracy. The close of the war marked to us a turning point in human relations and threw into bold relief the inadequacy of existing forms and institutions. Henceforth, trade unionism has a larger message and a larger function in society. Henceforth, the movement for the organization of the workers into trade unions has a deeper meaning than the mere organization of groups for the advancement of group interests, however vital that function may yet remain.

Henceforth, the organization of the workers into trade unions must mean the conscious organization of one of the most vital functional elements for enlightened participation in a democracy of industry, whose purpose must be the extension of freedom and the enfranchisement of the producer as such.[3]

[1] Gompers, *op. cit.*

[2] I have been so assured by Miss Florence Thorne, Research Secretary of the Federation.

[3] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1923, p. 31.

Succeeding paragraphs stress still more strongly the new departure.

Labor [the declaration states] now participates more fully in the decisions that shape human life than ever before and more fully in America than in any other nation on earth; but our participation must be brought gradually to completion. The purpose of this is not only the commanding of better wages and better conditions of work; vital as those are and have been. The purpose that now enfolds us is broader and nobler and filled with deeper meaning.

We have fought our way through the preliminaries, fitting the workers for their greater rôle by means of the opportunities that have come with the establishment of standards of life and wages befitting American workmen.

For the future, industry must become something of which we have a national consciousness. . . . The future demands an American industry in which it shall be possible for all to give their best through the orderly processes of democratic representative organization.[1]

Labor, then, seeks to share in the control of industry, seeks a new status in industry. But this new status will imply new responsibilities. Labor, says Gompers, recognizes this. After the workers, he writes, have won their way through the preliminaries, they seek through their union "to become an accepted, organized part of the industry, responsible in part for continuous progress in which they share equitably. It (the union) seeks the opportunity to render constructive, industrial service. The union should and, if given the opportunity, will become responsible for the workers in the industry."[2]

Ways must be found so that the workers, through their union, may cooperate in increasing production. The work-

[1] A. F. of L., *op. cit.*, p. 32.

[2] Editorial, *American Federationist*, August, 1924, p. 626.

ers possess valuable industrial experience. To overlook this is blindness. It is only through the full and eager participation of all elements that industry will be able to produce to the maximum.

To include the union among the functional divisions of the industry removes a cause of incalculable industry waste. . . . That incalculable production advantages will accrue if the union is permitted to function constructively is evident from practical experience. There are a number of illustrations of individual plants, but an outstanding example of the development that follows from cooperation is the relationship existing between the Railway Employees Department of the American Federation of Labor and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.[1]

Elsewhere he writes:

Labor has vastly more to give to industry than it can give through collective bargaining. In sending up its voice for a great constructive democratization of industry, labor is not asking for a chance to get. Labor is asking for a chance to give. There will be enough for all when it comes to the getting.[2]

THE SELF-GOVERNMENT OF INDUSTRY

From what has already been said, it is apparent that Gompers desired something more than a participation by labor in the control of industry as it is now organized, that is to say, participation in the management of the individual, isolated concerns. His ideal is that the anarchy of individual producers, uncoordinated except through the market, shall be resolved through the coming together of these producers and the development of a conscious coordination. Industry, he believed, must learn to develop a responsible mastery over

[1] Editorial, *op. cit.*, p. 626.

[2] *Ibid.*, May, 1924, p. 401.

itself; it must set up its own government. Then in this government of industry, labor must be given a part.

The functional elements in our national life [he writes] must fit themselves to work out their own problems, eradicate their abuses and furnish America with an ever increasing flood of commodities. . . . Industry alone has the competence, and it must demonstrate that competence through organization. . . . Industry must organize to govern itself, to impose tasks and rules and to bring order into its own house.[1]

In accordance with this view and to permit this consummation, the Federation at the 1923 convention went on record as favoring the repeal of the Anti-Trust Laws.

It was in connection with the Power Industry that Gompers stated his ideas most explicitly. In the two or three years before his death, Gompers became keenly interested in this industry. He realized the wonderful potentialities of Giant Power and desired that from the start the industry should be so set up and organized as to benefit all rather than a few. Speaking of this and other promising industrial developments, he wrote:

Finance would send all this great accumulating excess into profits. But humanity is entitled to a better deal of this new found production. The race as a whole has a stake in what the race achieves. Better methods, greater production must mean more things for the working masses in the first place. It must mean, then, more freedom from toil. And these things must be arranged with justice to every useful element in our citizenship. There can be no adjustments unless there is within industry the machinery for running the affairs of industry.[2]

To the public ownership of this industry, Gompers was opposed. But ownership, he believed, is not the important

[1] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1923, p. 32.

[2] *American Federationist*, May, 1924, p. 401.

question. What is important is the operation of the industry. After criticizing the present organization of the industry because it has so far refused to give a place in its councils to the organized workers, he goes on to state the principles which he deems essential for the best development of the industry:

1. Functional organization of every essential factor concerned in the industry, so that these organizations may serve as recording centers for the experience of each group necessary to conscious progress — trade associations, engineering and professional societies, trade unions, etc.

2. The voluntary association of the national organizations of these groups in a national industrial council, thus making the experience of all in the industrial world available for developing the best policies for production and control.

3. That each power undertaking and power plant develop local organizations along similar lines.

4. That trade unions shall develop full responsibility for negotiating all agreements determining wages, hours and conditions of work, for educating employees in the methods and processes of cooperation for the elimination of industrial waste and the development of more efficient production, and for assuring a square deal to the workers.

5. (Summarized.) Such regulation by political bodies representing consumers as may be necessary.[1]

Elsewhere, in speaking upon this same matter Gompers say that first "there shall be a full and frank acknowledgment of the rôle which labor has to play, and of its ability to offer cooperation in practical operation." Then, "with labor's rôle fully acknowledged there must . . . be a consciousness on the part of the whole industry that those who operate the industry in all its branches are entrusted with vital functions and have obligations within the industry, to the natural wealth brought into use and to other industries and

[1] Editorial, *American Federationist*, August, 1924, p. 628.

[to] the people as a whole . . ." Finally, "with experience as a guide in the applications of principles there must come into existence joint representative bodies in which every useful element within the industry may have a voice in such manner that it will not be possible for the combined voices of some to smother the voices of others in pursuance of justice." [1]

These same principles would, of course, hold for other industries. In his autobiography, Gompers pushes his thoughts and his hopes one step further into the future, and speculates as to the possible evolution of an economic parliament which shall legislate for all industry:

> The next step is organization of the shop, thus creating a trade council in which all factors in the industry have representation, and then organization of the whole industry along the same lines. This is a natural development which we see now in the making. Ultimately, perhaps, those things which concern all industry may be determined by a national economic body, truly representative, competent to make decisions and to secure compliance, or political regulation must develop a new technique and more competent personnel.[2]

Gompers sees evidence on every side that industry is already beginning to organize itself, is ceasing to be an anarchy. The concerns in the various industries are forming associations, setting up standards, conducting associational advertising, in short, beginning to act as a unit. "Self-government", he writes, "more or less democratic and tending to become more so, is developing constantly in the United States, entirely apart from the political government which is customarily regarded as constituting all government." [3] He cites an attempt on the part of the building industry to bring about a greater steadiness of building operations as a typical example:

[1] Editorial, *American Federationist*, Dec., 1923, p. 982.

[2] *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, vol. ii, p. 25.

[3] Editorial, *American Federationist*, May, 1923, p. 396.

The movement toward regulation of building operations was and is logical, constructive and a sign of the developing determination of industry to correct its own evils and to bring order into its own house.

The American Federationist has had occasions in previous issues to discuss this developing consciousness within industry of its own functions, its own powers and its own destiny. The building situation and certain of the outgrowths make pertinent an analysis from the point of view of labor and of all who see the need of self regulation in order to avoid political incompetence.[1]

Economic democracy, then, acording to Gompers means the development of a government in industry, in which the workers shall participate through their union. As to the sort of matters upon which the workers through their union shall have a voice, and as to the upper or lower limits of this participation in control, nowhere does Gompers speak. It is all rather vague. Probably it could not be otherwise. What Gompers has done is to pose an ideal, which as it is approached becomes more closely defined. But is this all that is meant by economic democracy? Emphatically no! There is another vital element. Thus reads a pronouncement of the 1924 convention, one which indubitably reflects Gompers' ideas:

> Labor's constructive policies outlined in last year's convention eloquently set[ting] forth hope for industrial democracy to be attained in cooperation with every useful element in industry, including forward looking employers, can be understood only in connection with labor's utter, inevitable and irreconcilable opposition to the conduct of industry exclusively or fundamentally for profit. Industrial democracy must be as clearly defined by what it moves away from as by what it moves toward.[2]

[1] Editorial, *American Federationist*, July, 1923, p. 560.

[2] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1924, p. 256.

In " Industry's Manifest Duty ", Gompers writes:

The operation of industry for the dominant purpose of producing private profit has led to a multitude of abuses. It has produced all the evils of autocracy because it is autocratic. Every factor that enters into the sustenance or operation of industry must be safeguarded and its just reward assured, but there must be an end to final control by any single factor. We have had and must continue to have, until democracy finds its way into industry, abuses for which all producers and all consumers have had to pay through profiteering and privation.[1]

Industry as it unifies and organizes itself, as it develops a consciousness of itself, must transform its ideals, must come to realize that " it exists to give service to a nation and not to a single master or to a syndicate of stockholders." Thus, writing at the time of the 1922 coal strike, Gompers said:

The present conflict is an expression of a fundamental dispute between industry and finance. It is a conflict between service and profit. Vast opposing forces are operating and must continue to operate until there is an adjustment that permits the supremacy of service and victory for public welfare. . . .

The purpose of coal mines should be to furnish coal and heat for light and power. Today the purpose of coal mines is to make profits for those who own coal mines. Even where profit is not made the purpose is profit, and it is with that in view that policies are made.

Production is primarily for profit. That is the basis of the real issue today. That is why mine owners, nationally organized, guard their secrets and refuse to agree upon terms with the workers. . . . Management is serving profit, not production needs, not the requirements of the people.

That is the biggest fact in the whole situation. It is the fact that is at the bottom of everything, and until people consider and understand that fact they are dealing with superficialities.[2]

[1] A. F. of L., *op. cit.*, 1923, p. 33.

[2] " The Fundamental Issues," *The New York Times*, July 23, 1922.

Do these statements mean that Gompers believed that the profit motive should be eradicated from industry, and that he has come to agree with the socialists who believe that industry should be so organized that "production should be for use and not for profit"? It would seem as though Gompers had come nearer to their position. However, there are some very fundamental distinctions. In the first place, Gompers, of course, does not believe that the private employer should be done away with, and his place taken by the state, nor does he believe that the profit motive should be entirely eliminated. Production, he believes, should be for use, *not dominantly or primarily* for profits. Individual initiative and private enterprise are good, and to retain these elements the profit motive is necessary. But profits must be held within bounds; they "must constitute a reward for service instead of a reward for speculation, chicanery, exploitation and autocratic domination." [1]

Labor [he writes] is contending against the continued enthronement of profit as the autocrat of our destinies. The greatest single achievement [he says elsewhere] for progress possible to this day and for this generation is the substitution in industry of the ideal of production for use, for service, and not for profit alone. The profit ideal constricts the creative productivity of both managers and employees.[2]

Industry must escape from the sole domination of the profit ideal. But if this consummation is to be reached, the influence of finance over industry must be reduced, even abolished. Finance rules industry today. And there must be divorce between finance and industry, because "a policy ordered by finance has profits as its object." [3]

[1] Gompers, S., Article for Wheeler Newspaper Syndicate, September 30, 1922.

[2] Gompers, S., "Labor, Management and Production," *Annals*, American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1920, p. 10.

[3] Gompers, S., *The New York Times*, July 23, 1922.

Too frequently, the group that controls investment or credit controls the policies of industry. When this occurs, industry finds itself guided by the desires of those who seek returns on investment, with little or no regard for any other factor. Modern industry . . . functions largely with the assistance of credit. But credit . . . is continuously purloined for purely exploiting, profiteering, speculative and wasteful purposes. . . . Every perversion of the proper functions of industry eventually strikes back at industry and leaves its damaging mark.[1]

However in the measure as industry organizes and governs itself, it will free itself from the domination of finance:

Industry as it becomes more intelligently and thoroughly organized and coordinated, as cooperative relations are extended, will in self-defence purge itself of the wrongful, wasteful, uneconomical, anti-social and criminal misuse of credit power. . . . This power which arises out of the people, out of the fact that they live and must use commodities, must be stripped of its abuses and administered in accordance with the demands of a normal, rational industrial life in the interests of service and production and not solely or mainly in the interest of profits and perversions of our industrial system.[2]

But this exposition of Gompers' ideals is not complete without mention of the role assigned by him to political government. Before the war Gompers exhibited marked anti-political leanings, but after the war, as courts handed down disastrous labor injunctions and legislatures passed compulsory arbitration measures, this anti-political leaning of Gompers became a veritable obsession. As a consequence, we find him preaching a sort of governmental nihilism:

The threat of state invasion of industrial life is real. Powerful groups, groups of earnest and sincere persons constantly

[1] A. F. of L., *Convention Proceedings*, 1923, p. 33.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

seek the extension of state suzerainity over purely industrial fields. Such ignorant encroachments as the Esch-Cummins Act, the Kansas Court of Industrial Relations and the Colorado Industrial Commission Act, each a blundering gesture of government acting under the spur of organized propaganda or of political appetite for power, are examples of what all industry has to fear. The continuing clamor for extension of state regulatory powers under the guise of reform and deliverance from evil can but lead into greater confusion and hopeless entanglements.[1]

Political government is incompetent. Legislators have no understanding of industry, of its needs and of the " laws of its development ". The personnel of political government is of far lower calibre than that of industry. " The gulf between politics and industry ", he writes, " is as wide as the seven seas and as deep. Also politics breeds the demagogue, the emotionalist, the flatterer, the master of cajolery; industry breeds the master of knowledge. The realm of the one is a realm of abstraction and theory; the realm of the other is the realm of performance."

I have said and I should like to repeat here that political government has definite limitations in the ordering of affairs, and it can go beyond these limitations only at the peril of the people and their social and economic organization. Political government, for example, is simply not competent to conduct industry, to work out the salvation of industry or to teach industry which paths to walk. There is a great gulf between politics and industry. Industry must work out its own salvation, build up its own great governing forces, apply democratic principles to its own structure and meet the needs of humanity out of its own intelligence.[2]

A few months after the enunciation of " Industry's Mani-

[1] A. F. of L., *op. cit.*, p. 31.

[2] Editorial, *American Federationist*, August, 1923, p. 624.

fest Duty", he wrote that perhaps the keynote of that declaration was that industry must "bring order to itself constructively" . . . or "there will be thrust upon industry a state of overlordship that will be as incompetent as it is illogical and oppressive." [1]

From these statements one would judge that it was Gompers' idea that industry should be absolutely sovereign, and suffer no interference whatever from political government. That is almost his attitude. In the following statement he gives his view as to the proper sphere of government in its relations to industry:

> The proper sphere of government in helping toward beneficial results is to find and furnish information, to get at and make known the facts, to encourage and insist upon development within the industry of machinery which will take from invested wealth its dictatorial power over policies of production, employment and public relations.[2] There is a normal course which must be pursued, just as there always is where life and its perpetuation are concerned. The government may be helpful, but it cannot take over the task without spoiling the whole effort.[3]

This completes the description of Gompers' ideal society. Industry must become a coordinated self-governing whole. In this self-government, labor must share. Then, this democratized industry must become conscious of itself and its real purpose, and produce for use, not solely or mainly for profits.

But how are these ideals to be realized? What is his pro-

[1] Editorial, *op. cit.*, May, 1924, p. 399.

[2] In 1919, the Federation went on record as demanding the Federal licensing of corporations and that corporations make public their accounts. Occasionally, Gompers repeats this demand. But as to encouraging and insisting upon "development within industry of machinery which will take from invested wealth its dictatorial power over policies of production, employment and public relations", nowhere does Gompers speak of any legislative measures whereby this might be done.

[3] Editorial, *American Federationist*, September, 1924, p. 747.

gram for attaining them? Now, so far as the unification and coordination of industry are concerned, there is no need of coercive measures to force industry in that direction. For industry, of its own volition, urged on simply by the hope of greater profit, is already well on the road to that end, and approaching it at a relatively fast pace. Industry is "rationilizing" itself, and "rationalization" covers all that Gompers means under this head. As to the admittance of labor to participation in the management and control of rationalized industry, that consummation may conceivably be attained, provided labor develops enough strength, by the method of collective bargaining. But how, especially since the political state is ruled out as a coercive agency, may industry be forced to transform its ideals, and subordinate profit making to goods making? Gompers has no program, nor does he believe there is need for one. For it is his opinion that industry of its own volition is already tending in the direction of his ideal. In other words, Gompers has given credence to the idea put forward by various economists that as management is separated from ownership it undergoes a reorientation and comes to place service to society on a par with or above the earning of dividends for absentee stockholders. Management separated from ownership, he believes, will be inclined to sympathize with labor's aspiration to share in the control of industry; especially so when labor offers its cooperation in increasing production. Management will be then willing to join with labor in a "great democratization" of industry—an industry that will take social service as its purpose.

> I am confident and all labor is confident [he writes] that when management with the help of labor succeeds in releasing itself from the short-sighted, selfish and unintelligent control of what we may well call financial oligarchy, most of the present restrictions of output will disappear and most of the disputes between employers and workers will be avoided.

Future welfare demands cooperation between management, labor and engineers for the release of all industry from a senseless, wasteful, unsocial and brutalizing control of powerful high finance.[1]

Now it is the belief in the existence of this trend which explains much that is otherwise puzzling in Gompers' statements at this time, and in the tone of those statements. It explains why the Portland Manifesto possessed such a strong note of exhortation addressed to elements outside the labor movement. For, in part, that declaration was a statement of labor's aims and aspirations as Gompers saw them, in part it was a prophecy, but in part, also, it was an appeal to forward-looking management to separate itself spiritually from ownership, to accept the proffered cooperation of organized labor, and to produce for use and not primarily for profit.[2] "We commit ourselves", reads the conclusion of that document,

to greater efforts in the organization of all workers: we urge upon all useful persons the imperative need of organization and finally the coming together in working bodies of all organizations through the representatives who shall speak for organic groupings. . . . We urge . . . a greater consciousness of purpose and a definite aim on the part of all towards its rapid fulfillment because the needs of the time make it imperative.[3]

At the time of the Portland Manifesto, it is apparent, Gompers and other Federation leaders believed that they had discovered a relatively short and painless route to industrial democracy. Industry, having rationalized itself, was to un-

[1] *Wheeler Newspaper Syndicate*, September 17, 1923.

[2] W. E. Walling, who was quite close to Gompers at this time, states in his *American Labor and American Democracy*, vol. ii, p. 54, that it was precisely this hope that underlay the Manifesto.

[3] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1923, p. 34.

dergo a moral regeneration and offer labor industrial democracy as a gift.

It is much too early to tell whether or not the belief in this trend is sound. It may be said that in the opinion of some the rationalization of industry, entailing a concentration of industrial control, may bring about an industrial feudalism, not industrial democracy. In this country, separation of management and ownership has perhaps proceeded furthest in the case of the public utilities, and certainly the managements here, as the Federal Trade Commission has disclosed, have been in no way disposed to put public service before profits, except in their published literature. The German and British labor movements do not share Gompers' hope that rationalization and professionalized management will result in industrial democracy, but are demanding a comprehensive political control over private industry as a way of achieving this end.[1]

But, in any case, so slight was the response of employers, organized or unorganized, forward-looking or not, to the Federation's invitation of 1923 to join with labor in a democratization of industry, that by the time of the 1924 convention, Gompers himself had abandoned hope for this eventuality, at least for the near future. He then returned to the view so much more characteristic of him, that labor would have to struggle and fight for every advance it made. Thus in his last editorial, he wrote:

> We must point out the road to democracy in industry is not a road that labor alone can travel. Democracy in industry implies and involves the participation of every useful element in industry. . . . Too frequently, labor is still compelled to fight for the simplest rights. It is compelled to fight for the

[1] See G. D. H. Cole, *The Next Ten Years of British Social and Economic Policy*, for a discussion of Rationalization and Industrial Democracy.

very ABC of industrial freedom. . . . Labor is ready to move forward as rapidly as the whole industry is ready to move. But while reactionary and bourbon employers stand across the pathway, labor must meet conditions as they are. This is what it will do.[1]

And it was at the El Paso convention a few weeks after that he made the statement previously quoted, that in this and other countries there has come to be " an autocracy . . . known as capitalism, . . . the dictatorship of wealth, of employers, of profiteers, of the possessors of material things ". It was the mission of labor, he said, to challenge this autocracy.

Thus Gompers in his last years came to hope that industry would undergo a reorientation in motives and produce for use and not mainly for profit. The significance of this change of attitude it not destroyed by the fact that he was only willing to express this ideal and to make the demand that it be realized when he thought industrial managers were approaching that end of their own volition. He did want this reorientation of industry to take place. He did pose this reorientation as an ideal at which the labor movement might aim. Also, that other leaders of the Federation echoed him in this is perhaps indicative on their part of some dissatisfaction with the present organization of industry. Perhaps, if and when the movement becomes more powerful, it will express this ideal more forcibly, and evolve practical measures to secure its attainment.

[1] Editorial, *American Federationist*, December, 1924, pp. 951-2.

CHAPTER III

"Unionism, Pure and Simple"

During the major portion of his trade-union life, i.e., except for a period at the very beginning and another at the very end, Gompers was a business unionist, a believer in trade unionism, pure and simple. In holding this view he was quite representative of the dominant section of the American Labor Movement. The aim of this chapter is to account for and trace the development of this attitude.

At the beginning of his career as a trade unionist Gompers was a socialist. His convictions along this line he absorbed from those class-conscious radicals in whose company he was introduced to the labor movement. Although from the time of his arrival in New York from London at the age of 13 he worked at the cigarmakers' trade and held a union card, he did not take an active interest in the trade-union movement until a later time. Perhaps, the thing most responsible for bringing Gompers into the work of the movement was the period of hard times brought upon the cigarmakers in the late sixties by the introduction of the 'mold.' For a time the union fought the introduction of this labor-saving device, but finally was forced to capitulate. But as a result of the struggle the union was practically wrecked, unskilled were substituted for skilled workers in some of the operations, and wages were drastically reduced. Protection for the workers was desperately needed. He began to think, and to attend labor meetings.

This being so, it was inevitable that he should come into contact with the radical movement that then flourished among the immigrant workers of the city. For New York was then

a haven for revolutionists, socialists and anarchists forced to flee from European repression. These men brought their zeal and fire with them. "The brilliant color of their thoughts", he writes, "came as a hope-filled alluring light on the gray misery of the New York industrial sky. Their talk stirred me deeply. I began to watch their gatherings." [1]

Then, in 1873, when twenty-three years old, an incident occurred that had the profoundest influence upon his life. Out of work, he found a job in the shop of David Hirsch, at that time the only union shop in the city. Hirsch was an exile, forced to leave Germany because of his revolutionary activities. In New York he had opened a cigar-making shop and there gave employment to many of his former comrades in the movement, exiles like himself. These men, as Gompers relates in his autobiography, practically all German socialists of the Marxian school, knew the labor movement and were familiar with its literature.[2] Most of them were members of the International Workingmen's Association, the First International, whose headquarters in 1873 were transferred to New York. In the quiet of the shop while rolling cigars between their hands these men talked about the world of revolution and labor.

The intellectual leader of this group was Ferdinand Laurrell. Laurrell had attached himself to the revolutionary movement in Copenhagen, and had rapidly forged ahead until he had become Secretary of one of the Sections of the First International. Involved in a demonstration, he had been forced to flee from Europe. Now in New York he occupied a place of intellectual, behind-the-scenes rather than overt leadership. Laurrell took a fancy to Gompers and a keen friendship arose between the two men, the older man acting as mentor and counsellor. The value of that friend-

[1] Gompers, S., *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, vol. i, p. 51.

[2] *Ibid.*, vol. i, pp. 68-74.

ship and guidance to Gompers is indicated by the fact that he dedicated his autobiography to Laurrell, with the words: "To the man who helped in guiding me aright at the time when I was groping for the right course, when I was governed by sentiment and emotions more than by my judgment and understanding . . ." [1]

This shop became for Gompers a school in trade unionism and the labor movement, and in their company he was immersed in the socialism of the First International. One day, Laurrell put into his hand a copy of Marx's *Communist Manifesto*. Unable to read it because it was in German, he determined to acquire the language, which he did. "Then," he writes, "I read all the German economic literature that I could lay my hands on,—Marx, Engels, Lassalle and the others." [2]

Laurrell, a Marxian socialist, was a firm believer in trade unionism and the proposition that any formidable labor movement had to be built upon the firm foundation stone of trade unions. This point of view he strongly impressed upon Gompers. "Study your union card, Sam", he would say to Gompers who came to him glowing with some new idea, "and if the idea doesn't square with that, it ain't true." [3]

It was Laurrell, also, who in those days exerted a moderating influence upon Gompers. For as Gompers hints in his autobiography, once in contact with the radical movement in New York, his emotional temper tended at times to take him far to the left. Thus, he writes: "In those young days I was full of fire and dreams and burning with sentiment and I might have followed any course or associated myself with any movement that seemed to promise freedom for my pals and fellow-workers. It was the wise counsel of my friend,

[1] Gompers, S., *op. cit.*, vol. i, Preface.

[2] *Ibid.*, vol. i, p. 75.

[3] *Ibid.*, vol. i, p. 75.

Laurrell, that saved me. 'Never permit sentiment to lead you. Let intellect dominate action.'" [1]

Gompers was much interested in the International, whose principles appealed to him as "solid and practical",[2] and was inclined to join. But Laurrell, who saw that the International, composed of European immigrants and American intellectuals, was entirely detached from American life, and besides, was on the point of breaking up, dissuaded him from this course. At the same time he advised him to go to their meetings and listen to what they had to say.[3]

It was then at the hands of these class-conscious socialists of the Marxian persuasion that Gompers received his introduction to the labor movement. During the early seventies his closest friends and associates were socialists. And as was but natural, Gompers took his ideology from these men, absorbed their socialist convictions.

Gompers never lost the traces left upon him by this early immersion in socialism and socialistic theory. Hillquit once described Gompers as the most class-conscious man he ever knew.[4] That class-consciousness, and likewise that idealism which led him to devote his life to the advancement of his class, in spite of the lure of other interests, pecuniary and otherwise, both had their source in this experience. From this same schooling came also his unequivocal acceptance for his class of the status of the wage earner, and his repugnance to notions of producers' cooperation with its aim of escape from this status. Finally, from the same source, came that faith in the inevitability of social democracy, his belief that the working class was destined to ascend to power.[5] Inci-

[1] Gompers, S., *op. cit.*, vol. i, p. 162.

[2] *Ibid.*, vol. i, p. 85.

[3] *Ibid.*, vol. i, p. 85.

[4] In conversation with the writer.

[5] See Chapter I, p. 18.

dentally, for some twenty years after this period Gompers' vocabulary showed the marks of this early domicile in socialism.

But Gompers' socialist convictions did not stay bright for long. During the middle and latter seventies, he and many other socialists underwent a reorientation in the course of which their socialist views were relegated to the background.

From the very first, even before he became a socialist, Gompers had been a trade unionist. One might say he inherited the tradition, for his father, also a cigarmaker, had always been a member of the union. It was largely, in fact, his trade-union benefit that financed the family's immigration to this country. And when they had arrived in New York, the elder Gompers and his son, as a matter of course, at once took out cards in the local union. Gompers never thereafter relinquished his membership, although for some years after that he took no active interest in his union and attended meetings rather casually. Then, when in the early seventies the coming of hard times caused him to become interested in the labor movement, it was to the trade-union that he turned without second thought as the agency through which he and his friends could improve their conditions. He became active in his union, led a number of shop strikes, gradually earned for himself among the employers of his trade the reputation of agitator.

In 1873, when he went to school at Hirsch's shop, he was taught trade unionism as well as socialism. For his tutors at this shop, from their study of American conditions, had become convinced that successful political action was as yet impossible, and that the only way American wage earners could be unified was through a strong trade-union movement that paid attention to bread and butter problems. It was only, they believed, upon the basis provided by such a movement that a political party could be launched. Thus,

these men, as they gave to Gompers a philosophy of the labor movement, also provided an intellectual support for his belief that the way to better things for wage earners lay through the trade union. Thereafter he never parted from that conviction.

From this time on, Gompers devoted himself ardently to trade-union work. There was much to do. Conditions in his trade were bad. The great majority of cigarmakers were outside the union ranks, and many of these were excluded by drastic entrance requirements of the International Union. Gompers and his friends worked to get the International to modify its requirements so that the semi-skilled bunch breakers and fillers could be admitted. Not succeeding altogether, they organized a new local, No. 144, of which Gompers was elected president, and took into it all the New York cigarmakers, regardless of method of work. Gradually, they worked out a procedure and built up their local so that it amounted to something.

In the course of this activity, Gompers was drawn into the vortex of the New York movement. From the open meetings of the International, he had graduated into an inner circle, a group composed of men whose bond of union was their dedication to the cause of labor. Laurrell was one of them, as was Adolph Strasser, who a few years after became president of the International Cigarmakers' Union, and later still was one of the pillars of the Federation. J. P. McDonnell, afterwards a prominent Federation leader, was a member. Another was J. P. McGuire, later leader of the carpenters and perhaps the leading genius of the Federation during its early days. But at this time McGuire, being interested in political activity, was not in harmony with them. Most of them were immigrant socialists, members of the First International.[1]

[1] *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, vol. i, pp. 86-88.

"From these men who were genuine revolutionaries in thought and deed, men to whom principles meant something", Gompers writes, "I learned the fundamentals of the labor movement. They were men who did not hesitate to risk something to accomplish a purpose".[1] Amid the chaos of the American labor scene they were groping for principles upon which the American working people could be unified and a labor movement established.

Long and earnestly we discussed plans, policies, and theories. Out of the chaos of radicalism and revolutionary phraseology we were seeking principles that would bring opportunities for better living to fellow workers. After a very busy and serious discussion that lasted into the early hours of the next morning, Kronburg christened our group Die Zehn Philosophen (the ten philosophers). But our interest went much deeper than academic discussions. It was a heart impulse that was a call to service. In a sort of mutual pledge, we dedicated ourselves to the trade-union cause.

Die Zehn Philosophen met and talked together as befitted our name. We dreamed together and then thrashed out our dreams to see what might be of practical value. From this little group came the purpose and the initiative that finally resulted in the present American Labor Movement—the most effective economic organization in the world. We did not create the American trade-union organization—that is a product of forces and conditions. But we did create the technique and formulate the fundamentals that guided the trade unions to constructive policies and achievements.[2]

The big point upon which these men were agreed was the superlative importance of the trade union. They were trade unionists; they believed in trade unionism; they took as their mission the conversion of American workers to trade

[1] *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, vol. i, p. 88.

[2] *Ibid.*, vol. i, p. 87.

unionism. Believing as they did that "economic organization and control over economic power . . . made possible influence and power in all other fields," [1] they assigned a subordinate place to politics. Political activity through a labor party they considered as yet inopportune and only to be engaged in when a sizable trade union movement had been established. And they were realists as well as socialists. They saw that among the American workers, possessed of no class consciousness, the only trade unionism that could take root would be one that promised and brought concrete immediate betterment. And since these workers were repelled by the radical European thought and phrases, they, in advocating the formation of trade unions as the first task ahead, were willing to soft-pedal their socialist convictions.

These men, then, were advocates and defenders of trade unionism. In those days trade unionism needed advocates and defenders. It is true that there had been unions before. In the early fifties, after the mirages of the hot-air forties had vanished, a tender crop of trade unions had arisen. "Stripped of universal and glowing ideals, without establishing a single labor paper to carry an appeal to the country," Andrews writes, "the skilled trades settled down to the cold business of getting more pay for themselves by means of permanent and exclusive organizations." [2] The panic of 1857 wiped out their organizations. Another batch had appeared in 1859-60 only to disappear with the coming of the Civil War. Then, nursed by the prosperity of the latter war and the post-war years, still a third group had risen and flourished. But the depression ushered in by the panic of 1873 mowed down many of them and reduced most of the rest to impotence. As a result, the workers lost confidence

[1] *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, vol. i, p. 223.

[2] Commons and Associates, *History of Labor in the United States* (New York, 1918), vol. i, p. 575.

in trade unionism, and turned to political activity as the way out. Again the reformers and quacks with their schemes for paradise overnight found themselves listened to. Even among the unions that managed to hold together, the doctrine that strikes were futile, useless, gained currency.

In those four years, those who taught that the way to salvation was through trade unions were indeed prophets crying in a wilderness.

The technique of trade unionism was as unformulated, as choatic, as primitive, as the current ideas concerning the value and place of trade unionism.

> There was a vast difference [Gompers writes] between those early unions and the unions of today. Then there was no law and order. A union was a more or less definite group of people employed in the same trade, which might help each other out in special difficulties with the employer. There was no sustained effort to secure fair wages through collective bargaining. The employer fixed wages until he shoved them down to a point where human endurances revolted. Often the revolt was started by an individual whose personal grievance was sore, who rose and declared: "I am going on strike. All who remain at work are scabs." Usually, the workers went out with him.[1]

Gompers' union—and his union was typical—was generally in a precarious financial condition. Strike funds, if there were any, were dissipated by innumerable, unplanned, spontaneous shop strikes. There were no benefits. The union was a sieve through which members drifted in and out.

But Gompers and the other nine philosophers in their advocacy of trade unionism, and in their practical work of building up their own trade organizations into strong and stable bodies, had to contend not only against the discouragement of the workers, but also against the definite opposition

[1] *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, vol. i, p. 43.

of a section of the socialists. Now the socialism of the First International in which Gompers was reared had always given a place of much importance to the trade union. In fact, the chief initial impulse leading to the formation of the International had come from the British pure and simple unions, who desired to effect contacts with the continental labor movement so as to prevent the importation of strike breakers, and during the first few years, these English trade unionists played a leading part in the Association.[1] Afterwards the English unionists stepped out and Marx dominated it. But Marx himself, although urging the conquest of political power, had always regarded the trade unions as of great importance. The viewpoint held by the International is clearly presented in the following excerpt from a letter of the General Council to a recalcitrant section of Chicago:

It appears strange that we should have to point out to a section of the International the usefulness and extraordinary importance of the trade union movement. Nevertheless, we shall remind Section 3 that each of the Congresses of the I. W. A., from the first to the last, diligently occupied itself with the trade union movement and sought to devise means of furthering it. The trade union is the cradle of the labor movement, for working people naturally turn to that which affects their daily life, and they consequently combine first with their fellows by trade. It therefore becomes the duty of the International not merely to assist the existing trade unions, and before all, to lead them to the right path, i. e., to internationalize them, but also to establish new ones wherever possible.[2]

But in Germany in the latter sixties, Lassalle, who replaced

[1] Lorwin, Lewis L., *Labor and Internationalism* [New York, 1929], pp. 31-45.

[2] Letter to Section 3 of Chicago, from the General Council of the I. W. A., June 3, 1874. Quoted in Commons and Associates, *History of Labor in the U. S.*, vol. i, p. 229.

Marx as the leader of the working class, preached a different doctrine. There, industrialism was less advanced than in England, the workers still aspired after the ideal of self employment, and had not yet commenced to form unions. Accordingly, Lassalle, unfamiliar with the trade-union movement of Great Britain, and believing as he did in the iron law of wages, i.e., that wages must remain always at the subsistence level, gave no place whatever in his program to the trade union. In his mind the only solution of the labor problem lay in the substitution of cooperative producers' establishments for private profit-making ventures. But these cooperative establishments could not be set up without governmental aid in the way of loans at low interest rates. Hence arose the necessity of political action so as to capture the state.

The German followers of Lasalle, who as a result of the Bismarkian repressions came to America in great numbers during the seventies, accepted this point of view as dogma. It was inevitable that they should come into conflict with the Internationalists. The conflict began in earnest in 1873. Previous to that year, owing to the prosperous condition of industry, the Lassalleans had found neither an opportune setting nor a following ready for political activity. But with the coming of depression they found the time ripening for the launching of a working-class political movement.

By 1873-4, therefore, the socialists in America were split into two groups and the lines of conflict drawn.

On one side were the Marxian (Internationalist) or trade-union socialists, men who placed main reliance upon the trade union, regarded that as the natural organization of the working class, and believed that most gain could be made by fighting largely upon the economic field. On the other side were the Lassalleans or political socialists, who, in their concentration upon political activity through a labor party, considered

the trade unions relatively unimportant. By 1874, divergence in thought between the two groups became one of organization, for in that year the Lassalleans seceded from the International and formed the Illinois Labor Party in the West, and the Social Democratic Party of North America in the East. This break, however, was not lasting, and shortly afterwards the two factions patched up their differences sufficiently to effect a fusion. The resultant organization was known as the Workingman's Party of the United States. The merger of their organization did not, however, put to rest the underlying differences between the two groups. Instead, each group jockeyed for mastery within the single organization. Indeed, as a contemporary saw it:

> The unification of both socialistic factions in America, which was accomplished with enormous difficulty, is still in danger. . . . The Lassalleans, and with them the younger immigrants, who are yet novices in the labor movement, desire to enter the political arena so as to acquire influence, by means of universal suffrage, first in the municipality, then in the several states. The Internationalists and the older and more experienced immigrants, on the other hand, foresee nothing but calamity if political action is begun at once. The former have small faith in trade unions and their efficacy, the latter expect salvation to come only from trade unions. The former point to the example of the German socialists, the latter to that of the British trade unions. . . . The former seek to get the small bourgeoisie interested in the party; the latter want to restrict it exclusively to wage-earners, and expect only demoralization to follow from a participation by still unproletarianized small bourgeoisie. The former are seeking to change the party platform at another convention, the latter threaten to step out of the party should this occur.[1]

At the convention of the organization in 1876, the trade

[1] Commons and Associates, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, pp. 273-4.

union elements had been dominant, with the result that immediate political activity had been vetoed. Shortly afterwards, however, outside circumstances intervened and shifted the mantle of power to the political faction. In 1877 occurred the great railway strike. The excitement aroused by this event gave a tremendous fillip to political activity. The socialists everywhere began nominating candidates and campaigning. Under these circumstances, control of the Workingman's Party passed irresistibly to the political faction, the name of which was shortly changed to that of the Socialist Labor Party. Those of the Internationalists who were dissatisfied with this turn of events thereupon withdrew from the party, and concentrated their energy upon organizing and building up trade unions.

On the whole the outcome of the political activity of the ensuing years gave support to the contention of the trade union faction as to the prematurity of political action. The campaigns of 1877 met with considerable success. Those of the following year were rather less successful, and in 1879, as industry revived and conditions improved, there was a marked abatement of socialist strength at the polls. By 1880 and 1881, the wage earners had lost interest in politics the Socialist Labor Party was torn by internal quarrels, the socialists counted for nothing, and a sturdy trade-union movement had developed. Many of the radicals, who had previously not seen the light, now turned to trade unionism.

This conflict between the trade unionist and political socialists had the strongest influence upon Gompers and his "Ten Philosophers". For in the course of this conflict, and as a result of it, these men, utterly convinced of the supreme necessity of trade unionism, were driven to a position which at the beginning they would have considered extreme and untenable.

Fundamentally, to repeat, the issue between the two fac-

tions was that of economic versus political action, of the trade unions versus a labor party. At the beginning neither side adopted one line of tactics to the utter exclusion of the other; rather it was a question of relative emphasis. To the Lassalleans, political activity looking towards the abolition of capitalism as the ultimate end was of first importance. However, in emphasizing political activity, they tended to minimize the role of the trade unions, regarding them as mere auxiliaries to the " Social Democracy ", and useful mostly as a vehicle for propaganda.

The Marxian trade-unionist socialists were unequivocally hostile to such a viewpoint. In their eyes a strong trade union movement, firmly bound to the workers by its attention to their immediate needs, was the first requisite. Without a strong trade-union movement to serve as a backbone, they did not believe that a successful labor party could be launched. Hence, in the absence, as was then the case, of a strong trade union movement, they regarded political action as premature and futile. The antagonisms of the conflict drove both sides to extremes. From merely assigning to the trade unions a subordinate role, the Lassalleans gradually took up a position of outright hostility to the trade unions. The Marxians on the other hand, at the beginning merely anxious to prevent the subordination of trade-union activity to political activity, were gradually jockeyed out of this position, and as the Lassalleans ranged themselves in full hostility to the trade unions, so they ended by condemning political activity entirely.

Now corollary to and linked up with this issue was the issue of immediate gains for the wage earners as opposed to ultimate ends. In their eagerness to pursue political activity looking towards the ultimate abolition of the wage system and the inauguration of a system of producers' co-operation, the Lassalleans gave little attention to and assigned small im-

portance to the task of securing immediate gains for the workers. On the other hand, the trade-union socialists were adamant that consideration be paid to the immediate amelioration of the wage earners' condition. More and more, in their eyes, the Lassalleans' program indicated a sacrifice of immediate gains to the pursuit of an ultimate ideal. Here, too, both factions drifted to extreme positions. From merely assigning a subordinate role to trade-union activity directed towards immediate advancement, the political socialists came to look upon this activity as futile, and even as bad because it diverted the workers' attention from the more fundamental task, that of abolishing the wage system. The reaction of the trade-union faction to this point of view was to look upon the political socialists as " impossibilists," and to devote their whole attention to bread-and-butter propositions. Finally, as the advocacy of ultimate ideals came to be more and more associated with those who advocated these ultimate ideals to the exclusion of immediate betterment, the trade union socialists lost their ultimate ideals, their socialism, and became trade unionists, pure and simple.

So Gompers during these years bent himself more and more closely to the task of building up the cigarmakers' organization and securing better wages and shorter hours for the workers in the trade. And when the political socialists interfered with this work, as they did on a number of occasions, it helped simply to burn into him an abhorrence of political activity and " politics " in the union.

One of these occasions centered about Gompers' efforts to secure the abolition of cigarmaking by home workers. A system had grown up whereby the employer owned tenement houses and rented flats to cigarmakers and their families. Whole families worked fourteen to seventeen hours a day. Naturally, these workers undermined the standards of the organized workers in the shops. To do away with the

system, Gompers and other leaders began working for legislation, first national and then state. They inaugurated their drive for a state law by a campaign of education and publicity, and followed this up by active lobbying. Then they sounded legislators and candidates on their attitude towards the bill, and endeavored to secure the election of friends and the defeat of the enemies of the measure.

On this feature of their campaign, they fell out with the political socialist element, who were opposed to trade unionists giving their votes to candidates of the old parties. In fact, although the socialists nominated no ticket that fall, they forbade their members to support the candidates of other parties. Unwilling to see the reform come about by any other medium than the Socialist Party, their obstructionist tactics even carried them to the length of directly opposing those candidates of the old parties who were pledged to vote for the bill in question, and who consequently were receiving Gompers' support.[1] These tactics, Gompers, a thorough pragmatist, viewed only with disgust. In his mind, the immediate betterment of the workers was of first importance, and he was willing to use any tactics or methods which he deemed expedient for securing this end.

Another episode, partly arising out of the above, acted to crystallize still further the antagonism between Gompers and the political socialists. Directly following the above event, the conflict between the political and trade union socialists, or more exactly the socialists and the "pure and simplers", within the cigarmakers' organization in New York, broke out into open war, with both factions contending for mastery of the Union. The Cigarmakers' Journal thus summarized the situation:

It must be borne in mind that within the last two years over

[1] *Seventy Years...*, vol. i, p. 191.

three thousand cigarmakers arrived in this city (nearly all Germans) who claim to be socialists and followers of Ferdinand Lassalle. They started the cry that officers of union No. 144 in New York who did not favor the socialistic method of agitating had to be bounced, even boasting that they would ultimately control the International Union.[1]

At the election of officers for local No. 144 held in 1882, the socialists came near to " bouncing the non-socialists from office ". Their candidate defeated Gompers' man for the presidency. But Gompers and his crowd refused to accept the election, and appealed to Strasser to set it aside on the ground that the winning candidate was a small manufacturer, and hence not eligible. Strasser did so; the International executive board studied the matter and the upshot of the whole affair was that the socialist faction stepped out of the union and formed the Cigarmakers' Progressive Union. As one result of this division the usefulness of the organization in New York, so far as conditions of employment were concerned, was for a number of years practically destroyed.[2]

One can readily surmise what effect this episode had upon Gompers. A difference purely over ideas and ideals, which would result in a wrecking of the union, drove home to him the fact that to the trade unions at that time " ideas " were disturbing, disruptive elements. By excluding " ideas ", " ultimates ", " politics " from the union, one excluded those things about which trade unionists held different opinions, differences which might cause the break-up of the union.

[1] International Cigarmakers' Union, *Journal*, April 15, 1882.

[2] That District Assembly 49 of the Knights of Labor gave their support to the Progressives against the International was one of the things that started Gompers on a rampage against the Knights. This rampage culminated in 1886 in the revamping of the Federation of Trade and Labor Unions into the American Federation of Labor, this latter organization being at its inception a rallying ground for elements disaffected with the Knights.

On the other hand, wages and hours constituted a common denominator for all wage earners. There could be no dispute over the desirability of $2.00 a day as compared with $1.00 or eight hours of daily work as compared with nine.

There may be mentioned here certain other events that occurred during this early period and which undoubtedly influenced Gompers' thought. During the early seventies, one of the sections of the International, Section No. 12, was captured and dominated by a group of reformers, faddists and intellectuals, headed by the famous sisters Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Clafton. These people were not wage earners. Trade-union activity for immediate gains they regarded as prosaic, unexciting. Their interest in the labor movement was inculcated mainly by a desire to use the movement for their own ends. The connection between this group and the legitimate labor movement proved only embarassing and damaging to the latter. By propagandizing in favor of free love, women's suffrage, universal language and pantarchy, these intellectuals brought down upon the head of the International and the labor movement the ridicule and opprobrium that then greeted these ideas.[1] Their demonstrations and radical pronouncements tended to draw down the ire and hostility of " sane and sober " folk upon all labor activities.

One such occasion was at the time of the execution of some of the Paris communists. Still another event of the same sort occurred during the winter of 1874. It was a period of severe business depression. Large numbers of workers were unemployed. The circumstances being what they were, the organized labor movement of the city began to urge upon the city authorities that measures of relief for the unemployed should be undertaken. Thereupon, Gompers writes, Section 12 awoke from lethargy to seize this oppor-

[1] Commons and Associates, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, p. 212.

tunity to put themselves in the limelight and to create a sensation. They put themselves at the head of the movement, made fiery speeches, paraded with red flags, etc. The result was, so Gompers avers, that they prejudiced the authorities against the matter-of-fact proposals of the bona-fide labor leaders. To their activities, Gompers attributes some of the blame for the Tompkins Square outrage, when the police savagely attacked a workers' demonstration for the relief of the unemployed.

As the fundamentals [he says] came to me they became guide posts for my understanding of the labor movement for years to come. I saw how professions of radicalism and sensationalism concentrated all the forces of organized society against a labor movement, and nullified in advance normal necessary activity. I saw that leadership in the labor movement could be safely entrusted only to those into whose hearts and minds had been woven the experiences of earning their daily bread by daily labor. I saw that betterment for workingmen must come primarily through workingmen. I saw the danger of entangling alliances with intellectuals who did not understand that to experiment with the labor movement was to experiment with human life.[1]

These experiences, their reaction from the program of the political socialists, then, caused Gompers, his fellow "philosophers" and other radicals, to relegate their socialism to the background and to become simply trade unionists. As such, during these years, Gompers and his group did pioneer work in developing the procedure and technique of American trade unionism. After several desperate struggles, they had, in 1877, placed their New York local firmly on its feet. That accomplishment gave them prestige in the International, and in that year Strasser was elected to its head. The International was then at its lowest point, possessing but 1016 mem-

[1] *Seventy Years* . . . , vol. i, pp. 97-98.

bers.[1] Thereupon, he and Gompers set about a reorganization. To prevent members from falling away during bad times, they introduced traveling, sick and out-of-work benefits. From the English unions they copied the Equalization of Funds feature, by which weak and striking locals could be built up by funds transferred from prosperous locals. They saw that just as their own locals had been weakened by the occurrence of numerous, uncoordinated, unplanned shop strikes, so the uncoordinated strikes of locals weakened the International. Accordingly, they instituted a centralized control by the International over strikes, and built up a strike fund.[2] These measures, Strasser's capable administration and the revival of industry brought about the rejuvenation of the Union. By 1881, membership had grown to 12,709 and the Cigarmakers' Union had become something of a model for the other unions of the period. It was taking a leading part, also, in bringing about a national organization.

What is the significance for the American labor movement of this conversion of Gompers and other former radicals to pure and simple unionism? To believe, as some have been inclined to, that it was this conversion which was primarily responsible for the development of American labor in the channel of business, pure and simple unionism, is sheer nonsense. At or slightly after the time of this reorientation, stimulated by the prosperity of industry after 1877, unions of the skilled were growing up in all parts of the country. These unions were untinged by radical ideas; they evidenced a strong determination to keep out of politics; they gave a cold shoulder to intellectuals and reformers. Their unionism was, in short, a pure and simple unionism. With or without Gompers and his group, unionism, and just this sort of union-

[1] Ware, Norman J., *The Labor Movement in the U. S., 1860-1895* (New York) 1929, p. 262.

[2] *Seventy Years* . . . , vol. i, pp. 166-169.

ism would have developed, just as it did in England. What Gompers' conversion did do was to make him available as a leader to this rising business unionism. It made him representative of it; it caused him to advocate and defend it and build it up; it caused him to hold and hold belligerently just the right principles, the principles that were essential to the growth of this unionism. For looking back, it seems positive that it was only upon these principles: action upon the economic field, no independent political activity, no ultimates, in fact, no ' ideas ' whatever beyond wages and hours, that a unionism could have developed in this country at this period.

He was the man for the hour. Then, he was madly right.

CHAPTER IV

Socialism

In the previous chapter it was seen how Gompers, in defending trade unionism and immediate amelioration, was led to relegate to the background those socialist ideals which he had absorbed in the period of his apprenticeship. Afterwards, events gradually led him to take up a position of extreme hostility to socialism and socialists.

To relegate ultimate ideals to the background was not to disavow them. Certainly, during the eighties, Gompers exhibited not a trace of hostility to socialism. Rather, though in his actions a complete business unionist, he believed when he thought about it, which was not often, that the substitution of a new social order for capitalism would be a most desirable contingency. For instance, at the time of the Henry George campaign in New York City in 1887, we find him saying:

> While keeping in view a lofty ideal, we must advance towards it with practical steps, taken with intelligent regard for pressing needs. I believe with the most advanced thinkers as to ultimate ends, including the abolition of the wage system.[1]

The phrase, " first things, first ", which he coined in replying to the arguments of the socialists, would seem to indicate that in his mind higher wages and shorter hours did not comprise the alpha and omega of trade unionism. Repeatedly we find him saying at this period that the trade unions are

[1] *New York Leader*, July 25, 1877. Quoted in Commons and Associates, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, p. 458.

instruments through which the working class will achieve both immediate amelioration and final emancipation. But the socialist commonwealth was for Gompers something quite remote, quite theoretical, a matter of little consequence in the affairs of the moment. He was a trade unionist to ninety-nine per cent, and it was those "first things," those "practical steps" that engrossed his whole attention. As leader of the Cigarmakers, and trying to build up a national organization, he was up to his neck in the practical work of the movement. Under these circumstances, ultimate ideals became more and more remote, less important; through lack of attention, as it were, they tended to atrophy and wither away.

As one of the leaders of the Federation, also, Gompers had every inducement to put his socialist convictions in the background. The greater part of the craftsmen and their leaders in the Federation were antipathetic towards socialism and the socialists, and that body was much too frail to stand politital dissensions. Nor would they have been willing to accept as an officer an avowed socialist.[1]

[1] In this connection, a statement made by Gompers in 1883, before the Senate Committee on Education and Labor, is interesting. Probably, while overtly speaking about others, Gompers is giving his own attitude. He said: "As to the question of the principles of communism or socialism prevailing in trade unions, there are a number of men who connect themselves as working men with the trade unions, who may have socialistic convictions, yet who never give them currency, who say: 'Whatever ideas we may have as to the future state of society, regardless of what the end of the labor movement as a movement between classes may be, they must remain in the background and we must subordinate our convictions and our views and our acts to the general good that the trade union brings to the laborer.' A large number of them think and act in that way. These last help those who have not such convictions to resist those who seek to use the trade unions to propagate their socialistic ideas. . . . Some of the men, of course, may not have high aspirations as to the future state of society, but as I have said, a large number of our able men, good men, I believe, have convictions that the state of

In 1896, however, occurred the first of a long series of events which gradually caused him to depart from this position of sympathy with, or at least tolerance towards socialism, and to become rabidly hostile towards it. In that year the newly established American Federation of Labor began a drive for the eight-hour day. On May first a general strike was instituted in which some 190,000 workers took part.[1] But the concessions gained were largely obliterated by the backwash of reaction which followed the explosion on May third of the anarchists' bomb on Haymarket Square, Chicago. "The effect of that bomb", Gompers afterwards testified, "was that it not only killed the policemen, but it killed our eight-hour movement for that year and for a few years after, notwithstanding that we had absolutely no connection with these people, none whatever; in fact, they had antagonized our philosophy, our thoughts, our methods."[2]

The incident drove home to Gompers the great handicap under which a trade-union movement, fighting for better wages and shorter hours, must labor in this country, if it was associated in the minds of the public with radicals or radical, i.e., socialistic, communistic, anarchistic, thought.

Four years later occurred the first of those clashes that were to have the effect of bringing Gompers into outright opposition to the socialists. For some years the socialists and the unions influenced by them had been unhappy in the New York central union body, the Central Labor Union. In 1889, charging that this organization was too conservative and was

society under which we live, the competitive system, is not the one that ought to last as the highest system of civilization that we can arrive at, yet they subordinate their theories or convictions to the general good, and many of them are regarded as very conservative and so act." Senate Committee on Education and Labor, *Report*, 1885, vol. i, p. 374.

[1] Commons and Associates, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, pp. 384-5.

[2] Quoted in Commons and Associates, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, p. 386.

tainted with political corruption, they withdrew and formed the Central Labor Federation. This body was recognized by the American Federation of Labor and granted a charter. A few months afterward, however, the socialists composed their differences with the Central Labor Union and a fusion of the two organizations took place. The peace was but momentary. In the following year, displeased at the lukewarmness of the Central Labor Union toward the eight-hour day and at its political connections, the socialists again withdrew, reorganized the Central Labor Federation, and applied to the American Federation of Labor for a charter. Their surprise was great when the executive council of the Federation, headed by Gompers, refused their application on the ground that the list of bodies affiliated with the Central Labor Federation contained the name of the American Section of the Socialist Labor Party. Since the constitution of the American Federation of Labor permitted only labor unions to be affiliated with it and forbade representation to political parties, the Federation, Gompers argued, was unable to grant a charter to the Central Labor Federation, that is, so long as the Socialist Labor Party was affiliated with it. The Central Labor Federation refused to ask the Socialist Labor Party to withdraw, and appealed from the decision to the 1890 convention of the Federation.

At the 1890 convention, the matter was debated long and acrimoniously, with Gompers leading the opposition to the socialists.

Apart from any constitutional consideration [said Gompers in his presidential report to the convention] I believed then and am convinced now that the Socialist Labor Party *as a party* is not entitled to representation in a purely trade union organization. . . . I am willing to subordinate my opinions to the well being, harmony and success of the labor movement . . . but I cannot and will not prove false to my conviction that the trade

unions pure and simple are the natural organizations of the wage workers to secure their present material and practical improvement and to achieve their final emancipation.[1]

In his speeches at the convention, Gompers set forth fully the reasons for his decision. He did not wish to see the Socialist Labor Party affiliated with the Federation because he wanted to preserve the character of the Federation as a purely trade-union body. If the Federation granted representation to the Socialist Labor Party, would not other political parties press for admission? He wanted to keep matters pertaining to partisan politics out of the Federation, since these matters would only be a source of dissension and disharmony. Furthermore, it seemed to him that the admission to their ranks of the Socialist Labor Party would be an opening wedge for committing the Federation to independent political activity either through the Socialist Labor Party or a party dominated by it. Again, admitting the socialists to representation in the American Federation of Labor was tantamount, he thought, to the endorsement of socialism. He was convinced that a great part of the trade unionists did not sympathize with the socialists or their program. Hence the endorsement of socialism might result in dissension and the splitting of some unions. Further, a number of organizations had not yet affiliated with the Federation, among them, the railway brotherhoods and bricklayers. Would these organizations, he inquired, be likely to affiliate with the A. F. of L., if they knew that the Socialist Party was represented in its councils? "We have so much to do, our aims are so great that we cannot afford to allow so much to be lost in order to gain so little".[2]

However, while obstructing their attempt to secure repre-

[1] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1890, p. 16.

[2] *An Interesting Discussion at the Tenth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor*, A. F. of L. pamphlet, 1891, p. 22.

sentation as a Party in the Federation, Gompers seemed to be anxious not to antagonize the socialists unnecessarily, and to keep on as good terms as possible with them.

Now I maintain [he said] that we do not antagonize the Socialist Labor Party. I deny that any one has given utterance to a word that could be so construed, but we ask that the trade unions be let alone. We ask that we may be enabled to work as trade unionists.

I say to you [he continued] friends and delegates, that the man who would accuse me or charge me of being an anti-Socialist simply says what he does not know anything about, he does not know Sam Gompers. I say here broadly and openly that there is not a noble hope that a Socialist may have that I do not hold as my ideal.[1] There is not an inspiring and enobling end that they are striving for that my heart does not beat in response to. But our methods are different; inherently do they differ in their methods.[2]

The convention, after several days of debate, voted to affirm the stand of Gompers and the executive council. Thereupon, "Mr Sanial (the socialist delegate representing the Central Labor Federation) withdrew, declaring war to the knife against the 'fakirs'", and saying that the "Socialists would cram Socialism down the throats of the American workingmen."[3]

[1] In his report to the convention Gompers also gave a statement of his stand with respect to socialism. "I maintain", he said, "that the working people are in too great need of immediate improvement in their condition to allow them to forego them in the endeavor to devote their entire energies to an end however beautiful to contemplate. I maintain further that the achievement of present practical improvement for the toilers places them on so much vantage ground gained and renders them more capable to deal with the various problems it is their mission to solve. The way out of the wage system is through higher wages...."

[2] *An Interesting Discussion...*, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

[3] Stone, N. I., *The Attitude of the Socialists toward the Trade Unions*, (New York, Volks Zeitung Library, 1900), p. 4.

This episode helped to crystalize the ideological differences between Gompers and the pure and simple trade unionists, and the socialists. On their side, the socialists looked upon a trade-union movement that refused to espouse any other ends than immediate betterment as the "rankest heresy", and while some endeavored by boring from within to capture the Federation for socialism, others took up a position of outright hostility. On the other hand, Gompers and his simon-pure trade unionists were determined to prevent the socialists from capturing the Federation, and thence making it " a tail to their political party kite ", while using the trade unions as vehicles for spreading socialist propaganda.

A great many of the ideas of the socialists were obnoxious to Gompers. Thus, at this period, quite a few of the socialists still believed that socialism would come by way of revolution. This notion Gompers considered fantastic. Again, the idea then had currency among them that " things must get worse before they can get better ", that is, that in accordance with the Marxian formula, the increasing misery of the proletariat would provide the stimulus for final revolt. Naturally, the dictates of this logic impelled them to hold that the most fitting activities of the trade-unions would be to spread propaganda rather than improve present conditions. Gompers thus describes their attitude:

> Should the trade union succeed in winning a strike and securing better conditions, the result is decried and the argument set forth that this is deplorable, since in their own vernacular, " it makes the working people contented with the present order of society and government ", hence is a hindrance to the full comprehension and introduction of their pet theory. On the other hand, should the men lose a strike it is immediately harped upon in a frantic effort to prove that the trade union is " old, effete and impotent ".[1]

[1] Editorial, *American Federationist*, April, 1896, p. 33.

Again, so great was their enthusiasm for their political party that in contrast they seemed to consider the trade-unions of no or little importance. It was the Party this, the Party that, the Party everything. "I am firmly convinced", Gompers once said, "that they cared less for the loss of a strike than they did for the gaining of a few more votes, or securing wider circulation of their paper."

Afterwards, the socialists dropped these ideas and conceded the primary importance of the trade union. But by that time hostility towards the socialists had become with Gompers a settled habit.

The rebuff given them in 1890 caused the socialists to launch a campaign against the "pure and simple" leaders of the Federation. Illustration of the virulency of their attack is found in the files of The People, then the official organ of the Socialist Labor Party, and under the editorship of Daniel De Leon. From the inception of this paper in 1891 hardly an issue appeared in which abuse, contempt and ridicule were not rained upon the head of Gompers, in particular, and all "pure and simple misleaders of labor" in general. "The pure and simple have been found out", runs a typical editorial. "Some are ignorant, others are corrupt, all are unfit for leadership in the labor movement. To civilize and unite them is out of the question. The social revolution must march over the bodies of each and every one of them. . . . Clear the way. Kick the rascals out." [1] Another says: "From this fear of ruining individual prospects arises the slander of socialism on the part of such men as McGuire, Gompers . . . and all the other advocates of pure and simple trade-union fakism who are secretly plotting for personal advancement with either capitalism or capitalistic politicians."[2]

The next clash between Gompers and the socialists oc-

[1] *The People*, August 13, 1893.

[2] *The People*, October 8, 1893.

curred in the years 1893-4. The 1893 convention voted to submit to the consideration of the affiliated unions a Political Program introduced and sponsored by the socialists. The preamble of the Program made reference to the inauguration of independent political action by British Labor. There then followed eleven planks. Of these all except one were of a non-controversial nature, having been previously endorsed by the Federation.[1] Plank ten, however, declared for the " collective ownership by the people of all means of production and distribution ", i.e., socialism. Finally, it was to be resolved that the convention endorse the political action of British Labor, and that " this program, and basis of a political labor movement be submitted for the favorable consideration of the affiliated unions and that their delegates to the next convention be instructed upon the matter ". There was no opposition to the submission of the Program, except that by a very close vote the convention deleted the word " favorable ".

At the 1894 convention Gompers came out unequivocally both against the adoption of plank ten and the inauguration of independent political action. Plank ten he opposed not because he disapproved of socialism so much, but simply because practical considerations made its adoption unwise. Thus in his presidential report to the convention he said:

A number of demands contained in that programme have been promulgated in almost every trade union throughout the world, but definitely dovetailed and almost hidden there is one declaration which is not only controversial but decidedly theoretical, and which, even if founded upon economic truth is not demonstrable, and so remote as to place ourselves and our movement in an unenviable light before our fellow workers, and

[1] Plank No. 8 declared for municipal ownership of electric light, gas, street railway and water systems; and No. 9 for nationalization of the telegraph and telephone systems, and the railways and mines.

which if our organization is committed to it would unquestionably prevent many sterling trade unions from joining our ranks to do battle with us to attain our first things first.[1]

For a number of days the matter was keenly debated, with Strasser and McGuire leading the attack upon plank ten. In their speeches, these two, who fully represented Gompers' point of view, stressed the fact over and over again that the endorsement of socialism would throw the unions into a maelstrom of dissension; that the solidarity of the Federation was too precarious to risk the strains and stresses accompanying this step. "Why not keep all the things we can get on with", said McGuire,

and leave out the points of disagreement until the labor movement has advanced up to the standards so much talked of by brother Morgan . . . I say: go on with your work of organization. Organization precedes education and should go hand in hand with it, and after our union doors are closed we are citizens as well as workers. Then let us join any party whether socialist, labor or any other. If you wish to go—go as citizens for this idea but don't bring in dissension where there are prohibitionists, democrats, republicans and men of all kinds at your work.[2]

The conservatives were successful. First the preamble was voted down. Then by a rather sharp parliamentary trick, plank ten was defeated, and finally the Program as a whole failed of adoption. But this reversal of the socialists cost Gompers the presidency. Sore at their defeat, the socialists united with the supporters of McBride and elected him to the presidency over Gompers.

[1] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1894, p. 14.

[2] *An Interesting Discussion on a Political Programme at the Denver Convention of the American Federation of Labor*, A. F. of L. pamphlet, 1895, p. 45.

Slightly more than a year after this episode occurred an event which more than anything else was instrumental in causing Gompers and the Federation leaders to become bitterly hostile to the socialists. In December 1895, Daniel De Leon stealthily launched the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance, and in so doing did irreparable injury to the cause of committing the American trade-union movement to socialism. The facts leading up to the occurrence were as follows.

The refusal of the Federation in 1890 to grant a charter to the Central Labor Federation had precipitated a divergence within the socialist ranks. One group of socialists, under the leadership of Morgan and Barnes, continued their proseletizing within the Federation for socialism. It was they who had fathered the Political Program of 1893, and although defeated in that instance, they nevertheless believed that they were making headway, and that the "facts pointed to a beginning of socialist ascendancy." [1] The second group of socialists, chiefly those in New York, were pursuing a different course of action. Upon their defeat in 1890, they withdrew support from the Federation and took up an attitude of outright hostility to it and at the same time began to cultivate the friendship of the Knights. Under the leadership of De Leon, they commenced angling for control of this organization, hoping that it would ultimately supersede the Federation. Naturally, their attitude could not but cause embarrassment to the group of socialists who were working within the Federation. As a matter of fact, De Leon ridiculed the activities of the latter group.

For a while De Leon's efforts to gain power within the Knights met with considerable success. Largely through his instrumentality, Sovereign was elected head of the order, displacing Powderly. When elected, however, Sovereign refused to make good his promises to appoint a socialist as

[1] Stone, N. I., *op. cit.*, p. 6.

editor of the Knights' paper, a condition upon which De Leon had supported him. This precipitated a conflict, the outcome of which was the withdrawal from the Knights of De Leon and his socialist followers. De Leon thus found himself outside of and without influence in either of the existing trade-union bodies.

A few weeks later, De Leon suddenly and without prior consultation with the Socialist Labor Party, launched the Socialist Trade Union and Labor Alliance as a separate trade-union organization and rival to both the Knights and the Federation. This was overt dual unionism, and as such was the logical outcome of De Leon's then present convictions that both the old organizations were too moribund and corrupt to be worth making over, and that it was necessary therefore to smash them and build anew.

The socialists greeted this new star in the labor firmament with mixed emotions. Some were enthusiastic; others, however, looked upon the move with consternation. These last were those who had been given to "boring from within" and who having achieved some measure of position and influence in the trade unions, saw that De Leon's venture would hamper their own activities and would strike a blow at socialist prestige in the unions. As soon as the aims of the Alliance were clearly revealed this section hastened to denounce it. Nevertheless, the Socialist Labor Party officially welcomed and endorsed the new organization. This endorsement, however, some of the socialists later declared was obtained by fraud, inasmuch as the founders of the S. T. U. and L. A. had given out that their body had as its chief aim the organization of the unorganized and not making war upon the older bodies.

The feelings aroused in the Federation and its affiliated unions by this attack were most intense. To Gompers, no words were bitter enough to characterize this effort of the

socialists to win the trade-union movement over to their creed. He saw in it something which could be described only as treason to the labor movement. It tore at the very roots of the cause it professed to aid. In that year, 1896, he wrote the first of those violent, rather raucous editorials against the socialists which later came so regularly from his pen. Thus:

We note that the work of union wrecking is being taken up by a wing of the so-called Socialist Party of New York headed by a professor without a professorship, a shyster lawyer without a brief, and a statistician who furnished figures to the Republican, Democratic and Socialist parties. These three mountebanks, aided by a few unthinking but duped workers, recently launched from a beer saloon a brand new national organization with the avowed purpose of crushing every trade union in the country.

In following out their program of destruction they have attacked first one union and then another. Nothing was sacred. Achievement or failure; fair conditions or foul; everything was alike so long as they could either rule the union or crush it. The fact that the workers would become an easy prey to the chicanery and greed of the capitalists was nothing to these union wreckers.[1]

Again, and replying in kind to the attacks of De Leon, he writes: "It may be now safely asserted that Professor Daniel De Leon, alias Loeb, has followed in the footsteps of Professor Garside, and is the paid hireling of the Pinkerton Agency." [2]

How intense were his feelings may be illustrated by the following:

We shall now merely outline certain incidents which have re-

[1] Editorial, *American Federationist*, April, 1896, p. 33.

[2] Editorial, *American Federationist*, July, 1896, p. 92.

cently developed in this moribund concern, conceived in iniquity and brutal concubinage with labor's double enemy, greed and ignorance, fashioned into an embryonic, phthisical dwarf, born in corruption and filth and now dying, surrounded by the vultures of its progenity, ready to pounce on the emaciated carcass of the corpse.[1]

This venture had the effect of every revolutionary movement that fails; it drove the Federation and Gompers further to the right, and increased Gompers' antagonism to the socialists. Nor was his antagonism confined to that section of the socialists who had sponsored the Alliance. Rather he regarded all socialists as being the intellectual authors of this outrage, and laid responsibility at their doorstep.

Various later dual unionist adventures but added fuel to the flame. In 1897 the Western Federation of Miners, under the leadership of the socialists, withdrew from the American Federation of Labor because of its conservatism, and a year later this group was the effective agency in the formation of the Western Labor Union. The success of the latter organization would have split the American trade-union movement along sectional lines, for, as its name implies, it hoped to secure the affiliation of western unions, thus routing the Federation in the west. In 1902, this organization changed its name to the American Labor Union, thus signifying the extension of its domain and desires to the entire continent. It hoped, chiefly through the organization of the unorganized, to displace the Federation. As a rival to the Federation, the American Labor Union was everything that the socialists thought a national trade-union body should be, except that it lacked strength. It intended to give attention to the unskilled, was organized along industrial lines, advocated independent political activity and subscribed to a radical philosophy. In fact, it took over as its own political

[1] Editorial, *op. cit.*, August, 1898, p. 115.

platform that of the Socialist Party. However, the American Labor Union did not fulfill the hopes of its founders, and by 1905 it was just alive enough to deliver itself over to the new hope of that year, the Industrial Workers of the World.

The I. W. W. capped the climax. Like its predecessors this was a radical dual union, was unequivocally hostile to the American Federation of Labor, and was designed to supersede the latter. As such Gompers turned upon it the full vials of his wrath and bitterness:

> The Socialists [he writes in 1905] have called another convention to smash the American trade union movement. This is the sixth "concentrated" effort in this direction in the past decade . . .
>
> Scanning the list of the sixteen signers of this call, one will look in vain to find the name of one man who has not for years been engaged in the delectable work of trying to pervert and disrupt the labor movement of the country. . . .
>
> We feel sure that the endorsement of the latest accession to this new movement of Mr. Daniel Loeb, alias De Leon, will bring unction to the souls of these promoters of this latest trade union smashing scheme. So these trade union smashers and rammers from without, and the borers from within are again joining hands; a pleasant sight of the pirates and the kangaroos hugging each other in glee over their prospective prey.[1]

Full blame for these affairs Gompers placed upon the socialists, all socialists. There was some reason for this. Those who organized and led these dual unions possessed socialist convictions, and they formed these rival organizations because the Federation could not be induced to subscribe to their ideology. The American Labor Union and later the I. W. W. had many members in common with the socialist Party; Eugene Debs, the socialist candidate for president,

[1] Editorial, *American Federationist*, March, 1905, p. 139.

had been one of the sponsors of the I. W. W. On the other hand, the Socialist Party never officially endorsed either the American Labor Union or the I. W. W., and a considerable section of the socialists deplored the advent of these organizations and disclaimed all responsibility. Be this as it may, Gompers did not draw fine distinctions in his prejudices. Rather all socialists of whatever sect or shade of opinion came within the circle of his animus.

While the dual unionists among the socialists were thus engaged, those socialists who believed in boring from within were energetically and militantly pursuing their activities along this line. In following this policy, while giving support and sympathy to the trade unions, they hammered away at the conservative leaders and agitated among the rank and file for their replacement by socialists. Gompers, as the head of the Federation and the apostle of pure and simple trade unionism, received his full share of socialist criticism. At the same time, the socialists utilized the conventions of the Federation to air their ideas, and attempted to get the Federation to endorse socialism and independent political activity.

From the early nineties up until the outbreak of the war, the socialists continued their boring from within, and, it may be said, increasing influence and power attended their efforts. During this period, it was they who constituted the official opposition to Gompers' administration, each convention practically being the scene of a battle royal between Gompers and themselves.[1]

[1] Gompers played up these annual conflicts with the socialists. He baited them, egged them on, magnified the differences of opinion that existed and utilized every occasion for launching into them amid oratorical fireworks. Why did he do this? Fine, in his *Labor Parties in the United States*, suggests that it was a way of covering up the lack of any real program. More probably, Gompers, being an exceedingly astute politician, found it expedient to do this as a means of solidifying the support behind his administration and keeping himself in office. It was simply

It was these events that bred in Gompers an implacable hostility towards the socialists. By 1898, certainly, he had become set in that attitude. Thus, in that year, we find him saying:

By their deeds shall you know them rather than by their honeyed and smooth words, with which they seek to allure our movement into such a vortex of complications and capture our movement as a tail to their political party kite. . . . I propose to succinctly call attention to the difference between the mask and the real face of the Socialists who advocate . . . this proposition . . . which embodies the idea which would disrupt this organization. They have done all they could to mistreat this organization and the wage earners in the trade unions, and to disrupt them. . . . They have besmirched the name of labor and sought to destroy our organization; they have attacked the honor, fidelity and manliness and the principles of the men who have tried to stand by the workers in their natural struggle for bettering the conditions of today.[1]

In the beginning as has been shown, Gompers opposed and fought the socialists, not because he was opposed to socialism as such, and thought the pictured Socialist Commonwealth would be an undesirable haven, but for certain other practical reasons. But it was impossible that socialism and

another instance of that old device of putting the state in danger so as to prevent internal rebellion. So long as the old guard in the Federation felt there was any danger of the socialists capturing the Federation, they could be counted on to rally behind Gompers, and not to put up any other candidate. Accordingly, Gompers made out of socialism a fearful bogey, that might at any moment "get" the Federation, and he posed as the brave hero who defended the Federation from this bogey. Now that Gompers put his anti-socialism to work and magnified it does not mean that he did not believe in his opposition to the socialists and socialism. Just the reverse: he was thoroughly sincere. He believed in his own bogey, and the more terrible he made it out to be, the more he feared it.

[1] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1898, pp. 121-2.

the socialists should be kept in separate compartments. Gradually, about the turn of the century, this hostility towards the socialists extended to and encompassed socialism.

But while the activities of the socialists constituted the first and chief cause of his antipathy towards socialism, there were other reasons as well. In the first place, in the then existing municipal, state and federal owned and operated enterprises, Gompers and the Federation leaders were given a first taste of socialism. The opportunity was thus given them to decide on a basis of experience whether the government as an employer was more or less desirable than the private concern. Gompers' conclusion was that all things considered the state was the less desirable employer, and hence he took up an attitude of opposition to further extension of government ownership and operation. A little socialism being bad, more would be worse.

The dominant reason behind Gompers' dislike of the state as an employer was his belief that workers so employed were or would be deprived of rights which they would possess if privately employed, i.e., the right to organize and to strike.

> From every point of view [he writes] this step of the French government (dissolving the syndicate of school teachers) assists the observer of State Socialism in a study of its principles and operation. The Government as employer brooks no opposition from its employees. It can and does wipe out their organization. . . . It can and does control the political activities of the employees. It can and does hire and discharge not only by merit but by systems of expulsion bearing upon the political principles of applicants for, or holders of, positions. With every extension of the functions of government, as they are now exercised in France, the field of freedom of the individual is obviously narrowed. . . . Is there no lesson for America's workers in this action of the government of the republic of France?[1]

[1] Editorial, *American Federationist*, February, 1913, p. 137.

Not only under government ownership do workers lose their freedom of action but government ownership and control, he says, solve nothing. Such steps simply mean the transference of industrial problems to the political field and their restatement in political terms, whence they must be solved by political methods. This transfer he considered bad. For the economic weapons of the wage earners were stronger and surer than their political ones. On the economic field they were more powerful. Furthermore, the transfer of the struggle to the political field would have forced the Federation to enter politics upon a large scale, perhaps to have undertaken independent political action. From this Gompers "shied away."

On this matter of government ownership and operation, Gombers executed a complete about-face in the course of some fifteen years. Previous to 1900 Gompers had been a strong advocate of governmental ownership and operation of railroads. "The government will take over the railroads, or the railroads will take over the government", he had said in 1893. Repeatedly, the Federation had endorsed this demand, and in 1893 and 1894 had declared for government ownership of telegraphs, telephones and mines. In 1897 he had said:

> And municipal ownership of public works, a bugaboo of a decade ago, when first demanded by labor, is now fast becoming popular. Our fellow unionists should urge with renewed vigor the extension and practical application of this principle so conducive to our general well being.[1]

But by 1910 he had reversed himself, and when after the war government ownership of railways became an important issue, he opposed it with all his might. After the war, he also opposed government ownership of public utilities.

[1] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1897, p. 11.

Another factor may be mentioned in connection with Gompers' hatred of socialism. Around the beginning of the century Gompers began to display a marked anti-political, anti-governmental slant. He adopted an attitude of hostility towards social legislation such as hour and minimum wage laws. He was opposed to giving the government greater jurisdiction over wage earners. He came to believe with Jefferson that "that government is best which governs least". In short, he became a proponent of laissez faire or individualism. Here, of course, he was at the opposite pole from the socialists, who believed in an extension of government functions and wanted the state to assume greater command over economic life. It is difficult to know whether this attitude was a contributory cause or an effect of his hostility towards socialism. At any rate, once adopted, it amplified and supported that hostility.

The war gave him additional reasons for hating the socialists. For he was intensely patriotic, and many of the socialists were lukewarm towards or opposed to the war. During this period, his two pet aversions were Germany and socialism. He succeeded in combining them to his own satisfaction. Thus he came to think of Germany as the home and source of socialism, and therefore to be doubly hated. Not only that, but he also came to hold that socialism was a sort of insidious propaganda deliberately spread by the German government before the war as a way of weakening its future enemies.[1]

[1] In his autobiography, vol. ii, p. 388, he writes: "Apparently at that time, he (Bismarck) studied the problem of making this agency (socialism) which he abhorred and hated, of practical use to the German Empire. The events of the War indicate that he anticipated the advantage to the German Empire through inculcating international socialism among the citizens of all countries with which Germany might some day come in conflict, and accordingly he promoted internationalism among the peoples of other countries, but nationalism for Germany."

As time went on, Gompers' animosity towards the socialists and socialism became more violent. He paraded this animosity, lugged it wherever possible into his speeches and writings, went out of his way to show it off. His hostility became something quite unreasoned; it became an obsession. At times, he seemed to be more anti-socialist than pro-labor.

In 1917 occurred the Russian Revolution. From the first, Gompers showed neither understanding of nor sympathy with the aspirations and efforts of the communists to establish a better social order.[1] Indeed, he matched the most reactionary elements in American life in the rabidness with which he attacked communism and communists. He steadily opposed the recognition of Russia by this country. During the Red scare in 1919-1920, he took an active part in the tracking down and persecuting of radicals.[2] To European labor leaders, Gompers' conservatism was so incomprehensible that in 1919 one of them, Legien, practically accused him of being in the pay of the employers.[3]

Finally, the account of Gompers' attitude towards social-

[1] The immensity of the gulf which separated the ideas of Gompers and other Federation leaders from those of the Russian workers was strikingly shown when James Duncan, first Vice President of the Federation, came to Russia with the Root Mission shortly after the revolution. Speaking of that visit, Albert Rhys Williams, in his *Through the Russian Revolution*, says: "No wonder the ideas of James Duncan of the Root Mission seemed trivial as he came with tedious talk of craft unions, the union label and the eight-hour day. His hearers were amused or bored. Next day a newspaper reported the affair thus: 'Last night the Vice President of the A. F. of L. addressed the Soviets. Coming over the Pacific, he undoubtedly prepared two speeches, one for the Russian people, and the other for the ignorant Eskimos. Obviously, last night he thought he was addressing the Eskimos'."

[2] While Gompers' hatred of communism was genuine, undoubtedly, one reason for his lavish display of this hatred was his desire to remove from the A. F. of L. the taint of radicalism which had fallen upon it in 1919-1920.

[3] Lorwin, Lewis L., *Labor and Internationalism*, p. 194.

ism is not complete without a mention of the antithesis, Voluntarism, which he posed against it. The factors responsible for his leaning in this direction were many, and were at first quite independent of his attitude towards socialism, but in his later years, consciously or unconsciously finding something wanting in a merely negative opposition to socialism, he found in Voluntarism a suitable counter philosophy and employed it as such. Voluntarism was his name for individualism; it was the gospel of group and individual liberty, or freedom from state interference; hence, as Gompers saw it, just the opposite of socialism, the essence of which was compulsion and state omnipotence.

To the labor movement during the last decade or decade and a half of his life, Gompers preached Voluntarism in and out of season. His autobiography, written in the last few years of his life, bears witness to the importance which this idea had for him: the words " voluntary " and " voluntary institutions " occur with wearisome repetition. He hardly made a speech or wrote an editorial in which this doctrine was not brought forward. As socialism, so did Voluntarism become an obsession.

CHAPTER V

Political Activities and Parties

Practically from first to last Gompers was opposed to the trade-union movement launching into independent political activity, that is, to the formation of a labor party. In accounting for this attitude and in tracing the development of his ideas along this line, it is necessary to go back to the seventies and eighties. For in this as in other instances it was in this period that Gompers formulated his ideas as to the proper policies and tactics of the labor movement, ideas which he saw no reason to change thereafter.

In an earlier chapter, it has been shown how Gompers had become convinced that trade unionism was by all odds the most important weapon of the wage-earning class. This conclusion as to the all-importance of trade unionism Gompers reached in time to play a leading role in the conversion to it of the skilled workers, a position, however, towards which they had already been tending. In advocating trade unionism, and in defending it against the political socialists, Gompers had become prejudiced against political action. He was influenced also, no doubt, by the same factors which were causing the workers generally to put political activity behind them.

The history of American labor through to the eighties bears conclusive witness to the fascination for the workers of the lure of independent political activity, how futile and devoid of tangible benefits that activity was, and how inimical was this line of activity to the rise of a stable trade unionism. Time after time the workers launched into poli-

tics, and time after time their embryo parties were captured by professional politicians or by middle-class reformers, quacks and intellectuals of whom, as one labor pronouncement of 1876 said "this bourgeois republic has produced a multitude." Thereupon the parties would disintegrate. Or lacking this efficient cause, they would fall to pieces because of internal dissension, or defeat, or else simply evaporate when with the return of prosperity the workers swung over to trade unionism. Not only was political action fruitless, but it hindered the rise of a stable trade unionism. Engaged in politics, the wage earners squandered energy which might otherwise have gone into the building of economic organizations. The introduction of political ideas into the unions often resulted in the disintegration of these organizations, all too fragile to withstand such stress and strain. Again, when depression rendered action upon the economic field difficult, the workers, succumbing to the lure of politics, would desert the unions. In short, for the incipient unionism of the sixties and seventies and eighties political activity was an extravagance too great to be afforded.

Looking back upon this era, it seems evident that before the unions could successfully act upon the political field, it was necessary for trade unionism itself to be firmly established and to get the habit of stability. The workers had first to learn that a political party, while it might be supplementary to trade unionism, could never be an alternative or a substitute.

Slowly, as the workers discovered the value and technique of trade unionism, that lesson was learned, but only with much back-slipping. The disposition on the part of the trade unions to avoid partisan politics is clearly seen in the case of the National Labor Union, a predecessor of the American Federation of Labor. Designed by its founders to be a non-political body, the National Labor Union evidenced a decided

trend towards political activity. The movement in that direction was accelerated by the depression of 1868-1869. At this time the body gravitated into the hands of those inclined towards independent political activity and in 1870 the National Labor Party was formed. This evolution was viewed with more than distaste by the trade unions. The National Labor Union still further discredited itself when it opened its door to intellectuals and social reformers. The trade unions quickly demonstrated their dissatisfaction. Thus in 1870 the Bricklayers National Union instructed its officers to correspond with other trade unions with the object of forming a national labor federation to consist of national trade unions only.[1] In the same year, the Cigarmakers severed their connection with the National Labor Union on the grounds that it had become an "entirely political institution."[2] By the following year, most of the trade unions and assemblies had deserted the Union and in 1872 when candidates for president were nominated, the National Labor Union was a body practically without constituents. It had become, as Gompers used to say, "a movement that did not move."

The National Labor Union having failed them, the trade unions made another attempt to form a national body in 1873. In that year a group of trade union leaders issued a call for a convention of trade unions to form a national organization. "Let not the failure of the past deter us from making renewed effort, but profiting by our dear bought experience, build up and perfect an organization such as was contemplated in Baltimore in 1866." The signers promised "that the organization when consummated shall not, as far as is in our power to prevent, ever deteriorate into a political party,

[1] Commons and Associates, *History of Labor in the United States*, vol. ii, p. 152.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 152.

or become a tail to the kite of any political party, or a refuge for played-out politicians, but shall to all intents and purposes remain a purely Industrial Association." [1] In answer to this call an "Industrial Congress" was formed. This body disappeared when the depression of 1873 engulfed the constituent trade unions.

During the prolonged depression of 1873-1877 this temper on the part of the unions to keep out of politics vanished. In 1877-1878 the workingmen everywhere made excursions into politics. The results, however, were most discouraging, and with the return of prosperity in 1879, the workers again turned their energies to the economic field.

As for Gompers, while elsewhere the trade unions and their leaders were engaged in politics, he concentrated his entire energy upon organization work among the cigarmakers. Although the cigarmakers during this period were unable to improve conditions much, nevertheless by keeping the organizations together they were in a position quickly to take advantage of the return of prosperity. The result was that the Cigarmakers led in the revival of trade unionism after 1878.

In all, to reiterate, at this stage of the game political activity and trade unionism did not mix. Gompers saw this and led in bringing home that lesson to the trade-union movement of the day.

In the following decade occurred two episodes which had a most powerful effect upon Gompers. One of these served to bolster up still more his opposition to independent labor politics. The other strengthened still further his faith in trade unionism and led him to grow cold towards the whole idea of improvement through legislation.

The political set-up of the American government, the separation of legislative and executive powers, the existence of

[1] Commons, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, pp. 157-158.

courts with the right to declare legislation unconstitutional, the division of the field between the forty-eight states and the national government and, it may be added, the constitutional safeguard thrown around property, all conspire to render labor and social legislation difficult, much more difficult than in other countries. This was brought home to Gompers in no uncertain fashion, when he and others of the Cigarmakers' leaders tried to secure the passage of a law abolishing the manufacturing of cigars in tenement houses.

First, they attempted to secure a national law but were blocked by the lobby of the manufacturers. Then they concentrated on securing state legislation. After more than two years' work a bill was passed. It was declared unconstitutional. A second bill, framed to meet the courts' objections, was passed, but this too was declared unconstitutional. Gompers tells the sequel in his autobiography. He writes:

> After the appeal court declared against the principle of the law, we talked over the possibilities of further legislative action and decided to concentrate on organization work. Through our trade unions we harassed the manufacturers by strikes and agitation until they were convinced that we did not intend to stop until we gained our point, and that it would be less costly for them to abandon the tenement manufacturing system and carry on the industry in factories under decent conditions. Thus we accomplished through economic power what we had failed to achieve through legislation.[1]

The second experience was in connection with the Henry George campaign in 1886. At the beginning, when the introduction of a labor ticket was first proposed, Gompers advised against it. "Our friends, John Swinton and Tom Armstrong and others we could name", he wrote in his trade-union paper, "might give some reminiscences to our friends who are anxious for workingmen to rush into politics." [2] However,

[1] Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, vol. i, p. 197.

[2] *Ibid.*, vol. i, p. 312.

when George accepted the nomination and the party was launched, such was the degree of enthusiasm that it was impossible for him to remain outside; he had to go along with the rest. He did, held a committee post or two, and was one of the campaign speakers.

But it was not the defeat of George which made Gompers react violently from independent political activity. Rather it was certain after developments. In the first place shortly after the campaign friction developed between George and the Single Taxers on the one hand, and the socialists on the other. Soon the socialists bolted and launched a separate party. Thereafter enthusiasm dwindled and both parties did poorly. To Gompers, watching the affair from outside, it must have been vividly demonstrated how futile and hopeless was the attempt to form a labor party, when the difference between factions was so great, the difficulties of framing a platform acceptable to all so large and the sentiment of solidarity so infantile.

"Let us", he was wont to say, "avoid as far as we can all controversial questions upon which we might encounter a fatal rock of dissension. Rather let us postpone such measures, though many may see the justice of them, until a greater degree of unanimity is achieved."

But this was not all. In *Seventy Years of Life and Labor* he describes the aftermath. After the above events,

> the so-called Henry George movement fell into the hands of some men who were not so scrupulous or so earnest as those who promoted the mayoralty campaign. A furniture dealer in New York named Coogan developed an ambition to become mayor and those in charge of the political organization catered to his ambition. It was a time before any corrupt practices act was on the statute books and the expenditures of Mr. Coogan were enormous. There were many who were profiting by the opportunity to get money, excusing themselves on the ground

that if they did not take it someone else would. One of my friends even asked me why I did not take advantage of the opportunity, but the question was asked only once. I was reliably informed that Coogan spent over two hundred thousand dollars in that campaign. The whole affair became the laughing stock of the people of New York, particularly among the organized wage earners who coined the phrase: "Was ist los mit Coogan?"[1]

Thus ingloriously ended one labor party. Gompers never forgot it.

Having thus arrived at the decision that the trade unions ought not to launch a labor party, a decision which most present-day socialist thinkers would probably regard as wise for that time, Gompers continued to hold that view. The socialists continued to attack it. Their attempt in 1890 to secure representation as a party in the Federation's councils has already been remarked upon. In 1893 and 1894, favored by the existence of industrial depression, they proposed a political program and endeavored to win the Federation to independent political action. In opposing that move, Gompers at the 1894 convention pointed to the results of the previous election. During the months preceding that convention the trade unions in many localities had plunged into independent political activity. Some three hundred labor candidates were nominated for various offices. Of these, however, only a few were elected.

> Sad as it may be to record [he said] it is nevertheless true that in each one of these localities politically they were defeated, and the trade union movement more or less divided and disrupted. What the results would be if such a movement were inaugurated under the auspices of the American Federation of Labor involving it and all our affiliated organizations is too portentous for contemplation. . . . Before we can hope as a

[1] Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, vol. i, pp. 323-324.

general organization to take the field by nominating candidates for office, the workers must be more thoroughly organized and better results achieved by experiments locally. A political labor movement cannot and will not succeed upon the ruins of the trade unions.[1]

Defeated in this instance, the socialists continued to propagandize for a labor party within the Federation. At almost every convention resolutions favoring a labor party were introduced, and beaten. Forced continually to defend his views it was not at all unnatural that in time Gompers' attitude on this matter crystalized and became more and more rigid. The opposition of the socialists had certain other effects. In the first place, it tended to identify in the mind of the Federation leaders the idea of a labor party with socialism and brought to it the odium attached to the latter. And, secondly, the fear that the socialists would capture the new party made them more unwilling to launch it.

So much for Gompers' negative views. In other respects, his ideas as to the proper political attitude of the trade-union movement underwent some changes. In fact the secular trend of Gompers' and the Federation's interest and activity in the matters political from the time of the founding of the Federation to Gompers' death was a constantly rising curve. From 1886 to the early nineties, the Federation was almost a purely economic body. Slight, if any, interest was taken in securing legislation; the struggle was confined almost wholly to the economic field. Beginning in 1893, the Federation and Gompers manifested more interest in legislation. In 1895, the Federation inaugurated the policy of having legislative representatives at Washington during Congressional sessions, so as to watch over measures in which labor was interested. Later the Federation headquarters were moved to Washington, and thereafter Gompers gave much of his time

[1] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1894, p. 14.

to appearing at committee hearings, urging labor bills, etc. While the Federation was attempting to influence national legislation in this fashion, locally the trade unions, state federations and city centrals were pursuing their political interests in diverse ways. In this matter the Federation gave complete local autonomy. Accordingly the local bodies were supporting candidates of the various parties, socialist included, and in some cases putting up their own.

The year 1906 marks the beginning of a new epoch, so far as political activity on the part of Gompers and the Federation is concerned. In the years preceding, the results of the Federation's legislative activity had been poor indeed. Congress had responded quickly to the dictates of business interests, but labor measures progressed " with leaden heel ". The situation made action imperative. Accordingly, Gompers called a meeting of the heads of the national unions and together these men drew up and presented to the President and the presiding officers of Congress " Labor's Bill of Grievances." This document recited the legislation which the Federation desired: an eight-hour law for federal employees, protection from the competition of convict labor, restriction of immigration, exclusion of Chinese, protection of the rights of seamen, the exemption of labor from the anti-trust laws, the right of federal employees to petition Congress for redress of grievances, and the abolition of the use of injunctions in labor disputes. It ended with the phrase: " Labor now appeals to you and we trust that it may not be in vain. But if perchance you may not heed us, we shall appeal to the conscience and the support of our fellow citizens."

The change in the political policy of the Federation is not represented by the items of legislation asked for in Labor's Bill of Grievances. All of these had been pressed for years. Rather, the change consisted in the carrying out of the above threat. However the new departure was simply a marked,

though logical, extension of the Federation's former policy. Instead of confining itself mainly to attempts to influence legislators already elected, the Federation went one step further back and attempted systematically to make its influence felt in the election of these legislators.

Congress having turned a deaf ear to their demands, Gompers called upon all local unions and central bodies to exert themselves to the utmost in the forthcoming election campaign to see that candidates unsympathetic to labor's interests were defeated and those friendly, elected. "The American Federation of Labor," the pronouncement ran, "most firmly and unequivocally favors the independent use of the ballot by the trade unionists and workmen, united regardless of party. . . The first concern of all should be the positive defeat of those who have been hostile or indifferent to the just demands of labor." [1] While the new plan of action did not, of course, call for the formation of an independent labor party, it was a step in that direction, since if the plan were carried out it would result in weaning the workers away from allegiance to the old parties.

It must not be thought that the greatly increased concern of the Federation with politics was due to any change in the conviction of Gompers and other trade-union leaders that the struggle of the wage earners for improved conditions ought to be confined as much as possible to the economic field. Rather the Federation was forced into politics, against its will, as it were, because of the need of protecting its economic activities, i.e., of securing and maintaining freedom to act upon the economic field.

Gradually the method of non-partisan political activity thus inaugurated by the Federation was developed and extended. In the first campaign, it resulted in little more than a number of scattered attempts to defeat notorious enemies of labor.

[1] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1906, p. 32.

Thereafter it was applied more widely and more systematically. With the rise of the primary system, the Federation carried its policy of defeating enemies and electing friends into the primaries, Moreover, records were kept of the votes of legislators upon labor measures, and thus an objective test of the friendliness or unfriendliness of candidates was obtained. In 1920, in order to secure more continuity in its political activity, the Federation made its non-partisan campaign committee a permanent body, instead of creating it anew for each election. A little later another phase in the evolution of this procedure was reached. This consisted in the adoption of the principle, used so successfully by the Farmers' Non-Partisan Political League, of concentrating effort in the primaries of the party which ordinarily dominates in each state, i.e., of concentrating voting power in the Republican primaries in Republican states, and in Democratic primaries in states that ordinarily go Democratic. Finally, in the years after 1920 a deliberate effort was made to cultivate the friendship of the farmers for mutual assistance in the advancement of their respective political aims.

Up until 1918 criticism of the Federation's non-partisan political activity and the demand for a labor party had come chiefly from the socialists. In that and the following years, however, as the rank and file of the movement went to the left, considerable sections of the movement echoed the socialists' contention. In 1918, for instance, the Chicago Federation of Labor voted 10 to 1 and in the following year the Pennsylvania Federation of Labor voted 300 to 1 for the formation of an independent labor party. A result of this sentiment was the formation of the Independent Labor Party in 1918, which merged with farm groups and became the Farmer Labor Party of 1920. The leaders of this movement declared that the results had proven the ineffectiveness of the non-partisan political methods of the Federation, and

that labor had nothing to lose and everything to gain by forming its own party. They said:

Certainly Mr. Gompers cannot keep a straight and serious countenance and allege that his "political" policy has yet—fourteen years later—adjusted these grievances (contained in the 1906 Labor's Bill of Grievances) in Labor's favor.

Look them over.

You will find every one of these grievances repeated in the protestations of the A. F. of L. convention at Atlantic City in 1919.

The only one that would seem to have been adjusted is the seamen's grievance, to right which the Seamen's Act was passed. But this was not due to the "political" policy of Mr. Gompers. It was due to the efforts of Andrew Furuseth, Victor Olander, and their associates and the long, uncompromising fight of Senator La Follette.

And even then the grievance still exists, for although the Seamen's Act was passed, it has been administered in a way that has kept Furuseth bobbing into and out of Washington constantly, fighting for the seamen's rights under the Act and boiling with indignation over the defeat of the law by the method of its administration.

The pitiful climax of Mr. Gompers' political effort stands forth exposed to the world in the Wilson administration. Never before had the leader of the labor movement in the United States attained such influence with the government. Never again will Mr. Gompers have so much prestige and personal entree into a federal administration. And what did it get the workers?

Never before has a federal administration so ruthlessly and shamelessly tramped upon the right of the workers. Never before has the misuse of the injunction to defeat the workers been so vicious. Never before have all the powers of government been so mobilized to defeat Labor. And this has been done by the Wilson administration and the more recent Republican Congress with diabolical enthusiasm. . . .

It is time to try some other plan. It is time to try to make the votes of the workers count. The only way it can be done is to marshal the workers into their own party, with no entangling alliances with Wall Street through a civic federation or any other instrumentality—a party controlled by themselves and most important of all—financed by themselves.[1]

Gompers together with the other old-time leaders opposed to the utmost this and other attempts at this time to drag the Federation into independent political activity. While admitting that the result of labor's non-partisan method left much to be desired, nevertheless they argued that greater headway would be made by continuing in this policy than by launching a labor party. The reasons which Gompers then gave for this stand may be briefly stated.

In the first place, he held, through its non-partisan methods the Federation had secured the passage of the labor provisions of the Clayton Act.[2] By so doing it had largely gained its political objectives; at least, so it appeared in 1912. That these provisions were later nullified by the Supreme Court surely could not be attributed to the political methods of the Federation. Again, had the Federation formed a labor party, the legislation desired would only have been secured with the success of that party. "Suppose in 1912", he said, "we had a labor party in existence; do you think for a moment that we could have gone as the American labor movement to the other political parties and said: "We want to inaugurate in your platform this and this declaration?"[3]

The formation of a labor party, Gompers believed, would

[1] The New Majority, February 28, 1920. Quoted in Carroll, *Labor and Politics* (New York, 1923), pp. 185-6.

[2] Prohibition of injunctions in labor disputes, right to picket, immunity from the Anti-Trust Acts.

[3] Gompers, *Should a Political Labor Party be Formed*, A. F. of L. Pamphlet (1918), p. 14.

mean a division of the energy of the movement. "Trade union activities," he said, "cannot receive the undivided attention of members and officers if the exigencies, burdens and responsibilities of a political party are bound up with their economic and industrial organizations." [1] Further, "the organization of a political labor party would simply mean the dividing of the activities and allegiance of the men and women of labor between two bodies, such as would often come into conflict." [1] Again, Gompers feared that if a labor party were formed trade-union activity would be subordinated to political activity, that the trade-unions would play second fiddle. This he thought had happened in England. Over there, he used to say, it was the British Labor Party this, the British Labor Party that, with never a mention of the British Trade Union Movement. Then the wage earners of America are strongly bound by traditional ties to the two old parties. To wean them away from their allegiance would be, he thought, a long and difficult task. Also, the organization of a new party would mean that a complete political program would have to be drawn up. Thus dissension would be bred, for it would be impossible to avoid leading questions. Furthermore, Gompers thought it undesirable to form a labor party for the reason that control of such a party would probably fall into the hands of the socialists. "Who are we going to have as the leaders of this new political party here", asked Gompers. He was not sure that the answer would be himself.

The argument, however, to which he gave most stress in his utterances, was that organized labor in the past has had the most disastrous experiences with political parties of its own. In spite of the fact that at the time of those experiences the trade-union movement was small in numbers compared with the more than four million members in 1918,

[1] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1919, p. 74.

that then the trade unions were new and easily shattered, while the unions of 1918 had attained the habit of stability, Gompers never doubted but that those lessons were applicable to the labor movement forever after.

But probably the most important reason for Gompers' opposition to a labor party was one that he never expressed in public, and that was that he discerned no dominating sentiment among the rank and file workers for such a party, and that the majority of the leaders of the various unions were against this step. Conversely, in the opinion of the writer, had these facts been otherwise, Gompers would conveniently have forgotten his arguments against the formation of a labor party, and would have come out for it; certainly he would not have opposed it. In the Henry George campaign we have one illustration of how Gompers was ready to subordinate his convictions to the desires of the movement, and to go along with it when it was necessary to do so in order to retain his position at its head. Other illustrations are not lacking. One of Gompers' passions was to keep the presidency of the Federation till he died. To do this he had to keep close ideologically to the masses, or, perhaps more specifically, to the clique of leaders who dominated the Federation. To receive their support and votes Gompers had to share and advocate their views. Something of a similar relationship existed between these leaders and the rank and file of their unions. In spite of all the talk about union oligarchy, these men in order to retain their posts could not separate themselves too much from the masses. Accordingly, while many of them for one reason or another had acquired a vested interest in the non-partisan political methods of the Federation, they too, had they discovered a well defined sentiment among the rank and file workers for an independent labor party, would not have opposed the move.

CHAPTER VI

The State

An important sector of Gompers' philosophy is his attitude towards and conception of the state, his ideas as to the sort of relationship which should exist between the trade-union movement and the state. To an analysis of this part of his philosophy the discussion now turns.

The best approach to this matter lies in an examination of his attitude towards specific pieces of legislation, both of the sort commonly known as social legislation and that which has to do with the legal status of trade unionism and its methods. The first sort of legislation reflects the efforts of the workers to use the political state as a medium by which they may gain their ends. Instead of coercing the employer into meeting their demands by means of a strike, they coerce him through the medium of a law. The second variety bears upon the freedom of the workers to form unions and to pursue such tactics as the strike, boycott, picketing, etc., by all of which they are enabled to market their labor on more favorable terms. We may begin with hour legislation.

Gompers was unequivocally opposed to the enactment of legislation fixing the hours of male workers in private employment. In the first place he believed that a much more effective, surer and in the long run quicker method for securing a shorter workday was the method of collective bargaining. That the workers through the trade-unions have progressively whittled down the hours of labor attests the success of this method. With a law there is the constitutional gauntlet to be run. Also Gompers feared the consequences of

the use of the method of legal enactment. "I have some apprehension", he said, "that if the legislature were allowed to establish a maximum work day, it might also compel workers to work up to the maximum allowed." Also, "the American Federation of Labor has apprehension as to the wisdom of placing in the hands of the government additional powers which may be used to the detriment of the working people." [1] If the government regulates hours, it may extend that regulation to other things.

Government power grows by what it feeds on. Give an agency any political power and it at once tries to reach out after more. Its effectiveness depends upon increasing power. This has been demonstrated by the experience of the railroad workers in the enactment of the Adamson law. When Congress exercised the right to establish eight hours for railroad men it also considered a complete program for regulating railroad workers which culminated in taking from them the right to strike and the conscription act providing for compulsory service.[2]

When talking about hour or minimum wage legislation, Gompers was in the habit of making references to certain Elizabethan statutes which fixed wages and made it mandatory upon the laborers to work at those wages. That Gompers did this is instructive. It was evidence of his belief that the present-day government is as inimical to the aspirations of the workers as was the Elizabethan government. The state is not responsive to labor; it is not controlled by labor. Accordingly the labor movement must steer clear of giving it jurisdiction over standards and conditions. Had the Federation been more potent politically he would not have felt that way.

Finally, for the workers to secure a shorter workday

[1] *The American Labor Movement, Its Makeup, Achievements and Aspirations*, A. F. of L. Pamphlet [1914], p. 15.

[2] Editorial, *American Federationist*, January, 1917, p. 48.

through legislative enactment smacked of charity. Virile, red-blooded men would "grit their teeth" and fight for shorter hours, and secure them by their own efforts, i.e., by collective bargaining. To secure the same end by getting a law passed was the weaker, less manly way.

The abhorence of the use of the method of legal enactment for shortening the hours of work did not extend to women and government employees. The former organized with difficulty and were generally unable to protect themselves. In the case of government employees, the legislative route seemed most expedient, since the strike was frowned upon.

In this matter Gompers was fairly representative of the Federation. Continually, the Federation has turned down resolutions favoring the legislative regulating of the hours of labor for men. However, various organizations, notwithstanding the Federation's attitude, have shortened their workday by law. Speaking of their actions, Gompers said:

> The Federation has not taken any position in regard to this legislation, but I think if called upon to approve [their course] would say that those organizations had acted within their rights. We would not deny their right to that line of action, although it arouses our apprehension. The fact of the matter is that some men unconsciously and with the best of intentions grant others the opportunity to rivet chains on their wrists.[1]

Minimum wage legislation for adult male employees in privately owned industries has never been seriously proposed in this country. Needless to say, Gompers would have condemned it. But he also was opposed to minimum wage legislation for women. "I apprehend that once the state is allowed to fix a minimum rate, the state would also take the right to compel men and women to work at that rate. . . . The attempts of the government to establish wages at which

[1] *The American Labor Movement, op. cit.*, p. 16.

workmen may work, according to the teachings of history, will result in a long era of industrial slavery. . ." [1] And then in a statement that sounds as though it came from a Supreme Court decision, he continues:

In my judgment the proposal to establish by law a minimum wage for women, though well meant, is a curb upon the rights, the natural development and the opportunity for development of the women employed in the industries of our country.[2]

The reasoning behind this statement was that minimum wage legislation would retard organization of trade unions among women workers. In this matter, Gompers was somewhat more conservative than the Federation, whose attitude was one of indecision.[3]

Although Gompers approved of Accident Compensation Laws, he was absolutely opposed to Compulsory Health and Unemployment Insurance, and unenthusiastic about Old Age Pensions. So characteristic of his social philosophy were his statements upon this matter that it seems well to let him speak for himself. Thus:

Social insurance cannot remove or prevent poverty. It does not get at the causes of social injustice. The only agency that does get at the cause of poverty is the organized labor movement.[4]

Compulsory sickness insurance for workers is based upon the theory that they are unable to look after their own interest and the state must interpose its wisdom and assume the relation of parent or guardian. There is something in the very suggestion of this relationship and this policy that is repugnant to free born citizens. . . .

There must necessarily be a weakening of independence of

[1] *The American Labor Movement, op. cit.*, pp. 14, 15.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[3] Carroll, *Labor and Politics*, pp. 85-6.

[4] Editorial, *American Federationist*, January, 1917, p. 47.

spirit and virility when compulsory insurance is provided for so large a number of citizens of the state. . . . [1]

Section 3 of Mr. London's proposition [proposed bill for health and unemployment insurance] provides that the commission shall prepare and recommend schedules of benefit. It shall prepare and recommend rules and regulations — rules and regulations, etc. That is the order of society as contemplated in the philosophy of—if I may use the sacred term of our friends—the socialists—regulation of every man's and every woman's every step, the regulation of the government, the regulation of its commissions and its officers.[2]

But the point I chiefly want to emphasize in our opposition to this so-called unemployment insurance is that we do not want to place more power in the hands of the government to investigate into and regulate the lives, the conduct and the freedom of America's workers.[3]

There were other reasons, although of a less direct sort, for Gompers' opposition to this legislation. In the first place, the inclusion of these measures and hour and minimum wage legislation as well in the Federation's political program would have meant an increase in the political activity of the movement. For a large program the non-partisan method of the Federation was unsuitable and hence the more the Federation became engrossed in political activities the more apt it would have been to form a Labor Party. The socialists realized this and urged social legislation upon the Federation with this idea in mind.[4] Gompers realized it too. His repugnance to the sponsors of these measures also played a part. " These measures," the Federation said,

[1] Editorial, *American Federationist*, April, 1916, pp. 270-1.

[2] Testimony before Congressional Commission on Resolution for a Com. on Social Insurance, April, 1916. Quoted in *American Federationist*, May, 1916, p. 347.

[3] From address before Commission on Emigration, International Labor Conference, Washington, D. C., November 15, 1919.

[4] Saposs, D. J., *Left Wing Unionism* (New York, 1926).

were formulated without consultation with the wage earners and introduced in legislatures with professional representatives of social welfare as their sponsors. The measures themselves and the people who present them, represent that class of society that is very desirous of doing things for the workers and establishing institutions for them that will prevent their doing things for themselves and maintaining their own institutions.[1]

Regarding old age pensions, Gompers was probably personally opposed, but in his public statements felt constrained to represent the Federation's viewpoint, which was one of mild support.

The Federation endorsed a federal old age pension bill in 1908.[2] Before the Industrial Relations Commission of 1914 Gompers said that the Federation favored a non-contributory old age pension. In 1916, in a speech before the Conference on Social Insurance of the National Civic Federation he said:

> There are certain species of compulsory social insurance that by their mere statement carry with them the conviction of their self-evident necessity and justice, into which the element of depriving the people of rights cannot enter, such as workmen's compensation and old age pensions.

But nevertheless he permitted his name to appear on the letterhead of the National Civic Federation's appeal for funds with which to fight old age pensions.

On the whole, in all these matters, Gompers was more to the right than the Executive Council of the Federation and the Federation itself somewhat more to the "right" than the rank and file in the unions. Thus, although Gompers was opposed to health insurance, in 1918 the executive council spoke somewhat favorably of it and recommended that

[1] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1916, pp. 144-45.

[2] *Ibid.*, 1908, p. 97.

the convention authorize it to make a study of the matter. As yet, however, it has not definitely approved of this measure. Many state federations, nevertheless, have come out for state health insurance.[1]

But while Gompers was opposed to the enactment of these measures, there was a host of measures coming under the category of social legislation that he approved of and fought for. All his life he felt deeply the injustice of child labor and throughout was active in securing legislation to prohibit it. He was in favor of and lobbied for various measures affecting governmental employees, among them an eight-hour law, accident compensation and old age pensions. He approved of accident compensation laws for workers in private employment, and fought for their passage. He helped to secure a great variety of measures relating to safety, sanitation, factory inspection and working conditions. He worked hard for laws excluding Chinese and restricting immigration, and for laws dealing with the sale of convict-made goods. Besides these he was interested in a host of measures of a more general nature. He helped to secure the income-tax law; after the war he pressed for federal incorporation of corporations, and for publicity of their accounts. He favored women's suffrage; in the nineties, he strenuously advocated the initiative, referendum and recall.

The general principles which underlay Gompers' attitude towards social legislation were that of disapproval of state interference in economic life, and that the trade unions should stick so far as possible to the economic field, and should not seek " to secure by legislation or at the hands of the government what they could accomplish by their own initiative and activities." But while Gompers thus preached the theory of laissez faire as a principle, in practice, as can readily be seen, he did not hesitate in this or that matter to depart from

[1] Carroll, *Labor and Politics*, pp. 106-108.

the principle. As Mary Beard says, "when the discussion passes from the realm of general principles to that of action, no one is quicker than Mr. Gompers to recognize the significance of the state and to make use of it in securing positive gains for labor." [1] It is one of the ironies of the situation that in the last three decades there has perhaps been no individual who has played a greater role in the securing of legislation favorable to the common people in this country than this man, who in principle abhorred the extension of state activities. And it is one of the ironies of his own career that he who preached to the labor movement an avoidance of the political field should during the latter part of his life have spent the major portion of his energies in looking after the political affairs of this movement.

Gompers regarded abstention from the use of the method of legal enactment as not only expedient for the movement but socially virtuous. The tendency of social groups to solve their problems through resort to legislation he thoroughly disapproved. Thus:

> Whither are we drifting? There is a strange spirit abroad in these times. The whole people is hugging the delusion that law is a panacea. Whatever the ill . . . or the ideal, immediately follows the suggestion—enact a law.
>
> If there is no market for cotton, those interested demand a law. If wages are low, a law or a commission is the remedy proposed. What can be the result of this tendency but the softening of the moral fibre of the people? When there is unwillingness to accept responsibility for one's life and for making the most of it then there is a loss of strong, red-blooded, rugged independence and will power to grapple with the wrong of the world and to establish justice through the volition of those concerned.

[1] Beard, Mary, *A Short History of the American Labor Movement*, New York, 1920, pp. 179-180.

Many of the things for which many are demanding legislative regulation should and must be worked out by those concerned. Initiative, aggressive conviction, enlightened self interest are the characteristics that must be dominant among the people if the nation is to make substantial progress towards better living and higher ideals. . . .

. . . We must not as a nation allow ourselves to drift upon a policy of excessive regulation by legislation—a policy that eats at and will surely undermine the very foundations of personal liberty.[1]

We may now turn to the second category of legislation, that which bears upon the legal status of trade unionism and its methods. What Gompers desired of course was that the wage earners should be left absolutely free to combine into unions, and to use tactics such as the strike, boycott, picketing, etc., which they deemed useful.

This last consummation Gompers believed was attained with the enactment of the labor provisions of the Clayton Act. This bill substantially embodied demands for which Gompers and the Federation had been struggling for years; so important an achievement was it that Gompers afterwards called it "Labor's Magna Charta." By it combinations of workers were specifically exempted from prosecution under the Anti-Trust Acts and courts were forbidden to issue injunctions prohibiting workers from striking, picketing, etc., or rather, such was the case before the badly phrased labor provisions of the act were vitiated by Supreme Court decisions.

This Act correctly reflects Gompers' essential ideas as to what the legal status of trade unionism ought to be. For the law established the legality of trade unions and their methods, but in a negative fashion only, by affirming the right of workers to form unions and to strike, picket, etc.

[1] Editorial, *American Federationist*, February, 1915, p. 113.

He did not ask for, he never imagined asking for, a legal recognition of trade unions as such on the grounds of their social usefulness. He did not think of demanding for the trade unions that they be recognized by the state as being constituent parts of the social structure, lawfully fulfilling an established and authorized function in industrial life.[1] According to his ideas trade unions were and ought to be extra-legal; the employer-employee relationship should be outside the scope of the law. Essentially, Gompers' legal defense of trade unionism boils down to a declaration of the "Bill of Rights".

This attitude and some of its implications are clearly brought out in the position taken by Gompers towards compulsory arbitration. Gompers fought this sort of legislation with all the strength at his command. Nothing, he thought, could be worse. Take away from the unions the right to strike and the labor movement is defeated. "The whole program for industrial betterment", he said, "rests upon the right to strike—that which gives the workers power. . . The strike is a method of aggressive militancy. This is a world of contending forces. . . No principle or institution has been maintained which has not been protected by the power of self defense."[2] That the interest of third parties, the so-called public, are injured by strikes is unfortunate but something that cannot be helped. "The public," he said, "has no rights which are superior to the toilers' rights to live and to their right to defend themselves against oppression."[3]

Men work or engage in business to earn a livelihood, not from

[1] Of course, such a conception would have little or no chance of being enacted into law. Practically, Gompers was thoroughly right in urging the legality of unions on the ground of individual rights.

[2] Editorial, *American Federationist*, December, 1919, vol. 26, p. 1130.

[3] Debate, *Gompers versus H. J. Allen* [New York, 1920], p. 80.

motives of altruism. They may stop when they please, just as the farmer may refuse to raise crops without regard to the needs of the consumers. . . . The "public" does not provide for the wage workers; its leaves them to pursue their own interests as best they may and all they owe the public, legally speaking, is respect for law.[1]

For the government to interpose in labor disputes and to force workers to accept the decision of an "industrial court" as to wages would be to establish involuntary servitude. "The right to quit work at any time and for any reason sufficient to the worker himself is the concrete expression of personal liberty."

Finally, not only must the unions be left free to strike for any reason sufficient to themselves, but none of their activities should be subject to review by the courts or limited by statutes. This attitude was brought out in an emphatic fashion when Gompers testified before the Lockwood Committee investigating the New York building situation. The Committee found the building trade unions (and also the employers) engaged in the most indefensible practices, for which there was no remedy at law. Unions restricted output; membership in some cases was severely limited and union cards rented out to non-members at so much per day; members were expelled for most unjust reasons; jurisdictional disputes and practices damaged employers and made for inefficiency; apprentices were limited. Yet while Gompers admitted the existence of abuses, he was adamant that there should be no recourse to law or the courts so as to provide a remedy.

Q. "I understand you to say that if these abuses exist that have been pointed out, and hundreds of others that I might point out, some of which I will, you would grant no relief, is that right?"

[1] Editorial, *American Federationist*, July, 1902, p. 368.

A. "Not by law."

Q. "You would rely upon the evolution of the labor movement and its enlightenment to grant that relief, would you not?"

A. "Yes, guided by the success which has already attended the American labor movement in respect to these matters."

Q. "And there you would leave it, with no remedy to the aggrieved people?"

A. "Not by the Courts."

Q. "And not by an administrative body?"

A. "By law, no."

Q. "And you would not support any kind of regulation, no matter how extreme might be the abuse?"

A. "Regulation by state or—

Q. "Yes, by the State."

A. "No."[1]

"God save Labor from the Courts," his reply to a suggestion that the courts be given the right of review over the expulsion of members, fully summarized his reaction to all suggestions of this character. Now one reason for this attitude was his fear that by granting to the courts the right of review over the activities of the unions, the funds of the unions would be drained by endless litigation. But mainly, his attitude followed naturally from his feeling that, as he explained it, "organized society has no understanding of the affairs of Labor",[2] that the government and especially the judiciary lacked sympathy with and were antagonistic towards organized labor.[3] The courts, he felt, were thinking in terms of archaic conceptions. Attentive to the rights of

[1] *Mr. Gompers under cross examination; excerpts from testimony of Mr. Gompers before the Commission of the New York Legislature (Lockwood Commission) investigating Housing Conditions.* Pamphlet published by League for Industrial Rights, 1922, p. 16.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[3] Senator Walsh: "Do you go so far as to say that the judiciary has

property, they had not yet become conscious of the rights of labor. Perhaps, influenced by wealth, they did not care to.

Q. "You are terribly afraid of the law?"

A. "I am not, I told you." . . .

"I am afraid for my country if there is any attempt at this legislation (giving courts jurisdiction over the activities of unions) . . .

"Afraid of the development of greater tyranny and power."

Q. "Resulting in what?"

A. "Of wealth, largely the control of legislation and of the courts."

Q. "Do you believe that wealth has as much control over legislation as labor has?"

A. "Oh, my—

Q. "Do you?"

A. "Do I? I know it".[1]

One does not have to go far to discover the causes for this feeling. They lay in Gompers' and labor's bitter experiences with governmental agencies, and especially with the courts. Gompers had seen one injunction after another handed down crippling labor's activities, and depriving the workers of rights and liberty. In the Danbury Hatters, and Buck Stove *v.* Gompers Cases the courts forced the unions to relinquish the use of the boycott. The Hitchman Coal and Coke Company *v.* Mitchell Case put heavy obstacles in the way of organizing workers. Successive court decisions infringed upon

not any sympathy or is not as highly educated toward the rights of labor as other branches of the government?

Mr. Gompers: "I am quite certain that this is so, Sir."

Testimony of Samuel Gompers before United States Senate Commission on Manufactures in its hearing on Production and Profits in Coal. Pamphlet issued by American Federation of Labor under the title, "President Gompers on Labor, the Court, and the Law", 1922, p. 7.

[1] Gompers, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

the picketing activities of unions. The labor provisions of the Clayton Act, the result of years of political effort designed to legalize unions and their activities, were to a large extent nullified by court decrees. Progressively the courts have hampered the exercise of labor's weapons while leaving the weapons of the employers untouched. In 1919 an injunction was handed down against the striking miners which even forbade the union officials to conduct the strike and tied up the union funds. Insult was added to injury in that the injunction was based on the Lever Act.[1] The sponsors of this war-time measure had definitely assured Gompers that it would not be used against labor. "The autocratic nature of the government in these proceedings", said Gompers, "is of such a nature that it staggers the human mind."[2]

He himself had the bitter experience of being sentenced to one year's imprisonment for disobeying a court injunction.[3] The injunction handed down by Justice Wright in the Buck Stove *v.* Gompers Case forbade not only the placing of the name of the company upon the "We don't patronize" list of the Federation, but prohibited even the mention of the boycott and of the case itself by the Federation or its officers. To have obeyed the injunction Gompers would have had to refrain from even reporting to the convention the outcome of the case. So unjust did Gompers deem this injunction, so flagrant a violation was it of the right of free speech, that he decided the only possible course was to disobey it, which he did.

It is interesting in this connection to note the policy advocated by Gompers in regard to the injunction:

[1] *American Federationist*, December, 1919, pp. 1125-1128, January, 1920, pp. 41-50.

[2] *Ibid.*, December, 1919, p. 1127.

[3] Because of a technicality he was never forced to serve this sentence.

Bearing this in mind your committee desires to state that whenever the courts issue any injunctions which undertake to regulate our personal relations either with our employer, or those from whom we may or may not purchase commodities, such courts are trespassing upon relations which are personal relations, and with which equity power has no concern; that these injunctions are destructive of our rights as citizens, as well as of popular government and therefore we insist that it is our duty to disregard them, and we recommend that such be our action, taking whatever results may come.[1]

Pursuance of this policy would have meant overt defiance of the government, and rebellion.

It was these experiences, then, which bred in Gompers the attitude that the government and the courts, to put it mildly, lacked sympathy with and understanding of labor. His reaction to this was to insist that labor and its affairs must be outside the jurisdiction of governmental agencies, and to urge the labor movement to avoid, so far as possible, the political field. The more vicious the injunctions issued against labor, the more police and troops interfered with strike activities, the more Gompers urged this point. His attitude appears in some respects, at least, to be somewhat irrational, of the nature of an emotional rebound. Other people, noting the increasing concern of governmental agencies with trade-union activities, and the hostility of these agencies, might have considered that a more rational procedure would have been to take steps to exercise more influence over the government, and thus render it more sympathetic to labor's aspirations.

In the preceding pages the salient features of Gompers' social philosophy have been brought out. That philosophy may now be briefly summarized. Society is made up of contending groups, each of which has an eye single to its own

[1] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1908, p. 219.

interests. Labor is one of these groups. It alone understands its interests and ought to be left free to advance them. Hence, what the workers chiefly demand of society is recognition of their rights to form unions, to strike, to boycott, etc. As with labor, so with the rest—progress will be made if each group follows its own self-interest without regard to others. For the government to interfere in this struggle is wrong and harmful; wrong because such interference is destructive of personal (and inalienable) rights, harmful because it destroys initiative, independence, and self-reliance, — qualities that form the basis of a nation's strength. "I still believe with Jefferson", he says, "that that government is best which governs least." [1] Governmental regulation of and interference with the affairs of labor is especially to be abhorred because the government is unfriendly, even hostile to labor. But not only is it hostile; political government is not equipped to deal with the affairs of labor, with industrial relations, and for that matter, with industry altogether. It does not understand; it is not competent. When it touches industry, politics fumbles and retards. So, political government must take a back seat while industry works out its own problems.[2]

[1] Debate, *Gompers versus Allen*, 30.

[2] "Several times the plain question has been put to me by members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary: 'Mr. Gompers, what can we do to allay the causes of strikes that bring discomfort and financial suffering to all alike?' I have had to answer: 'Nothing'. My answer has been interpreted as advocating a policy of drift. Quite the contrary to my real thought. Foremost in my mind is to tell the politicians to keep their hands off and thus to preserve voluntary institutions and leave the way open to deal with problems as the experience and facts of industry shall indicate. I have with equal emphasis opposed submitting determination of industrial policies to the courts. But it is difficult for lawyers to understand that the most important human justice comes through other agencies than the political. Economic justice will come through the organization of economic agencies, the increasing adjustment of economic relationships in accord with principles evolved through

There are various titles for this philosophy. Gompers' name for it was "Voluntarism". Others would call it "laissez-faireism", "individualism", or "anarchism."

The chief reason for Gompers' possession of this philosophy has already been remarked upon. The government was unfriendly. A bulwark for trade unionism was found in the theory of individual rights, of laissez faire. But consistency ran away with him. Having applied laissez faire in this respect, he applied it elsewhere. Probably, too, various other factors help to account for his possession of this ideology. It may be that through his contacts and friendships with employers he absorbed from them their individualistic ideas. In joining the National Civic Federation, Gompers and other labor leaders thoroughly exposed themselves to the contagion of these ideas. Again, as will be seen in the following chapter, his early work as president of the Federation of Labor probably influenced him in this direction. Finally, it is possible that his own personal philosophy of life abetted these other factors. In his living, he would suffer no inhibitions, no restraints, no compulsions. He had to be absolutely free. Conventional usages he disregarded utterly if he wished.

In conclusion, there is this to be said: "Voluntarism" for Gompers had a wider meaning than has so far been given it here. For him it was a concept universally applicable. It meant an avoidance of compulsion, and an advocacy of voluntary institutions in every field. Trade unions in his eyes were voluntary bodies and were blessed on that account. The Federation was a voluntary association. It was an organization that had no power or authority over its constituent bodies. It was Gompers' desire that the Federation

experience, the formulation of material scientific standards and the development of the principles and coordinating functions of management, based upon understanding of human welfare.

S. Gompers, *Seventy Years,...* vol. ii, p. 26.

should remain so. It was his belief that the Federation owed its success to these voluntary principles. Hence Voluntarism for Gompers was a principle to be held to by the Federation both in the governing of itself and in the governing of its relationships to organized society. It meant complete trade union autonomy, the independence of each union with regard to other unions and to all society.

Of course, "compulsion" and "voluntarism" are not to be taken altogether literally. No law compels workers to belong to their union, but some workers are compelled to belong by threat of not being able to earn their livelihood if they do not. But the unions nevertheless are voluntary bodies. Similarly, the Federation by its own law cannot compel a constituent union, because the union will leave the Federation. Actually, it can and does exercise some authority over its unions because unions find it disadvantageous to be outside of the Federation. In other words, it is legal or political compulsion that Gompers opposed so bitterly.

"Voluntarism" was for Gompers supremely important, so important that when he felt death coming he made this theme the subject of his testament to the trade-union movement. To the 1924 convention, he said:

> Events of recent months make me keenly aware that the time is not far distant when I must lay down my trust for others to carry forward. When one comes to close grips with the eternal things, there comes a new sense of relative values and the less worthy things lose significance. As I review the events of my sixty years of contact with the labor movement and as I survey the problems of today and study the opportunities of the future, I want to say to you, men and women of the American Labor movement, do not reject the cornerstone upon which labor's structure has been builded, but base your all upon voluntary principles. . . .
>
> . . . I want to urge devotion to the fundamentals of human

liberty—the principles of voluntarism. No lasting gain has ever come from compulsion. If we seek to force, we but tear apart that which united is invincible.

We have tried and proved these principles in economic, political, social and international relations. They have been tried and not found wanting. Where we have tried other ways, we have failed.[1]

[1] Gompers, S., "The Voluntary Basis of Trade Unions", an address made at the 1924 convention of the Federation. Pamphlet issued by Workers' Education Bureau of America, 1925, pp. 9-11.

CHAPTER VII

Industrial Unionism, the Unskilled, Trade Autonomy

This chapter will discuss Gompers' attitude towards certain important trade-union policies, namely, industrial unionism, organization of the unskilled, and trade autonomy.

INDUSTRIAL UNIONISM

The agitation for industrial unionism began in the first years of the new century. The sponsors of the idea, within or without the Federation, were socialists. Without the Federation, the agitation crystallized in the formation of the Industrial Workers of the World, which aimed at organizing the unorganized, chiefly the unskilled, along industrial lines. Within the Federation, the socialists took every occasion to point out the weaknesses of craft unions, and at the conventions tried to get the Federation to endorse the principle of industrial as against craft unionism. The first resolution of this sort was introduced at the 1903 convention. After reciting the weaknesses of craft organization, the resolution proposed that " the convention appoint a committee whose duty it shall be to study the situation and report to the next convention a plan by which the trade unions can be grouped together on industrial lines, thus forcing contending factions into agreements with each other and promoting the solidarity of labor." [1]

In practically every year for the next decade, resolutions

[1] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1903, p. 108.

along the same lines were proposed. Gompers and the administration within the Federation fought these resolutions, and succeeded in defeating them. His reasons for doing so were various. In the first place, the whole idea was sponsored by the socialists, and as put forward by them was bound up with socialism and couched in socialist verbiage. This association made industrialism repugnant to the conservatives within the Federation.

Again, and more important, the socialists concentrated their agitation upon the need and benefits of industrial unionism, and brought forward no practical plan whereby industrialism could be obtained. The great majority of unions in the Federation being craft unions, to ask these unions to endorse the principle of industrial unionism was, accordingly, almost like asking them to commit harikari. For, it is evident, craft unionism and industrialism are mutually exclusive and conflicting. Take the Brewery Workers' Union as an example. This union, as an industrial union, proceeded to organize teamsters, engineers, and firemen working within brewery plants. In so doing, it came to loggerheads with the organizations claiming jurisdiction over these crafts. The establishment and spread of industrial unions, then, could only mean the loss by craft unions of members, influence and strength. An endorsement by the Federation of the principle of industrial unionism, then, might have such results as these. In the first place, seceding bodies might organize themselves on industrial lines, and then ask that the Federation recognize them rather than the old organization, since they were industrial in structure. Again, in cases of jurisdictional disputes between existing craft and industrial unions, such as the Brewery Workers against the Firemen and Engineers, the Federation would have been obliged to use its influence in favor of the industrial union. Or, it might mean the chartering of industrial unions, which would be

bound sooner or later to run afoul of existing craft unions. And, finally, if the Federation set itself to force industrialism upon existing unions, it would mean a wholesale violation by it of the principle of trade autonomy.

Gompers expressed the dominant point of view in various of his reports to the convention. Thus in 1906, he said:

> There are some who would divide existing forces of organized labor under the pretence that the trade-union movement does not expand its efforts to cover all the workers of a given industry; who would dismember our trade unions of today under the delusive notion that all the workers in a given industry, regardless of trade or calling, be organized into what they are pleased to term an industrial union. They evidently imagine that the trade-union movement was " made to order " in a mold, that it is a fixture. They are entirely oblivious of the fact that . . . cooperation of workers in a given industry and of all industries must come through a natural, orderly, and well defined course as a result of necessity and experience.[1]

In his report the following year, he speaks of the changing conditions brought about by the introduction of machinery and the division and sub-division of processes, and says that the movement must meet these changes. But, he continues:

> To attempt to meet these conditions without taking into account our existing organizations as they are now formed: to attempt to institute what some are pleased to call industrial organizations with the avowed purpose of destroying existing trade unions is not only foolhardy, but it is ruinous, nay criminal.[2]

But while the socialists were thus harping on the principle of industrial unionism, and Gompers and the administration were opposing it as a principle, or slogan, the Federation it-

[1] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1906, p. 13.

[2] *Ibid.*, 1907, p. 20.

self was moving slowly in the direction of industrial unionism. It did so by two roads, amalgamations and the formation of trade departments.

Amalgamations of related crafts were first encouraged by the executive council as a way of solving the great number of jurisdictional disputes which deluged the Federation in the latter nineties and the first decade of the century. But as early as 1901, the Federation in the Scranton declaration had gone on record as holding "that the interests of the trade union movement will be best promoted by closely allied and subdivided crafts giving consideration to amalgamation, and to organization of District and National Trade Councils." During this period, a great number of amalgamations did take place, the chief reason for most of them, however, being jurisdictional disputes. It was this development, then, that lent color to Gompers' statement at the 1907 convention that "trade unions are not rigid organizations which cannot meet new conditions . . . and when there are a number of organizations covering various parts of an industry, they are not only cooperating for the common good, but, eventually, developing into one amalgamated body." [1] However, while Gompers and the Federation leaders were willing to look with favor upon, and to advise, the amalgamation of related crafts, they were adamant that the Federation could not force crafts to amalgamate. They were trade autonomists, holding that the Federation was a voluntary body and could not and should not exercise compulsion over its component parts.

The formation of trade departments was another way in which the movement was tending in the direction of industrialism. In 1907 the Building Trades Department was formed. This department was largely a natural evolution of the Building Trade Councils, organizations that had ex-

[1] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1907, p. 20.

isted for decades, and was, accordingly, due more to the efforts of the building trades themselves than to the executive council. In the following year, partly owing to the encouragement of the Federation, a metal trades department, a railway employees department and a label department were established. Later, a mining department was formed, and the council proposed the formation of a wearing-apparel department and a transportation department, but the unions concerned were not interested. Gompers himself, while having no great hand in the formation of these departments, approved of them. Their formation, he wrote, would prove conclusively " that the carping critics of our movement, who charge or insinuate that the trade union movement does not progress, advance or develop (utter a) baseless and mischievous untruth." [1]

After 1912, the agitation for industrial unionism underwent something of a reorientation, and took the form chiefly of a drive for amalgamation, with various progressive leaders actively agitating for amalgamation of the unions in their industries. To a large extent the issue between the industrialists and non-industrialists became one of trade autonomy, Gompers and the administration holding that the Federation could not violate the sovereignty of the unions by forcing them to amalgamate.

Nevertheless the ruling powers of the Federation still continued to prefer the craft to the industrial form of organization. This was amply demonstrated on the occasion of the drive to organize the steel industry in 1918-1919. Instead of organizing all the steel workers, irrespective of type of work done, into one organization, as the miners are all organized into the United Mine Workers' Union, the drive was undertaken by some 24 unions, and the workers divided up among these. Experience proved this attempt to organ-

[1] Letter to W. J. Spencer, *Convention Proceedings*, 1908, p. 70.

ize the workers by crafts to have been the greatest mistake possible. Their day to day work had made the workers shop, not craft, conscious. The all-important feeling of solidarity was broken down, and suspiciousness was engendered when the workers found themselves grouped not with their every-day shopmates, but with strangers who happened to be performing the same type of operation elsewhere in the plant. Rightly, the Interchurch World Movement's *Report on the Steel Strike* names this factor as one partly responsible for the failure of the strike.

In 1921-22, the drive for amalgamation got under way again with renewed vigor. William Z. Foster was the directing genius and leader of that drive. For a time it made excellent headway, numerous local unions and state and city federations giving their endorsement to the project. But when Foster aligned himself with the communists and it became apparent that the Workers' Party was behind the drive, the conservative leaders threw their weight against it and crushed it.

In conclusion: almost all the explanations given to account for the present weakness and ineffectiveness of the trade union movement in this country stress as one very important factor that the trade-union movement is structurally obsolescent, that the forces of the movement are divided into more than 100 unions, by-and-large craft unions, whereas the situation calls for a few industrial unions. Many competent observers believe that the large key industries like steel, auto, electrical equipment and food, where the vast majority of workers are unskilled or semi-skilled, and hence are shop or plant conscious, not craft conscious, cannot be organized on craft lines, and that this is one reason why these industries are now unorganized. Against the modern great corporation, the divided craft unions, they believe, are entirely impotent. Hence, in their opinion, the great necessity of the

of the day is real amalgamation of the existing unions into a few large industrial unions.

May one, therefore, indict Gompers' leadership, since at his death he left a movement that was structurally archaic? In a measure, yes. It is true that Gompers did not oppose a workable industrialism, i.e., amalgamation, except when the communists sponsored it. But he merely drifted along. He failed to appreciate the need and importance of this development. He did not advocate it, did not work to educate the movement to this step. In short, in this instance, he did not give to the movement a constructive, far-sighted leadership. That was done, in so far as it was done, by groups outside the administration of the Federation, by the socialists, and by outstanding individuals like Foster, Fitzpatrick, and Johnston.

ORGANIZATION OF THE UNSKILLED

The unskilled and semi-skilled among American workers are largely unorganized. Major reasons for this are the inherent difficulties that unskilled workers have in organizing, i.e., their easy replacement, the language barriers, the flow of immigrants from abroad, and the tremendous strength and resources and the intelligent labor policies of corporations employing this labor. It is also true that the American Federation of Labor has made no great effort during the past decade and a half, the war and immediate post-war years and the last year or so excepted, to extend organization among these workers. In part, this was because Gompers, who had previously done yeoman's work in organizing, was becoming old — in 1905 he was fifty-five — and consequently was losing some of his former initiative and drive. In part, it was because after 1905 the Federation launched out upon a wider political activity, and consequently the energy and activity of its officers and Gompers were di-

verted from organization work to looking after the political interests of the Federation, lobbying, etc. In part, too, it was due to the fact that the outbreak of great numbers of jurisdictional disputes after the turn of the century kept the Federation's organizers busy mediating between the various international unions. The result of these various factors was the breakdown of the Federation as a centralized organizing machine for the movement. One illustration of this is that the initiative for the campaign to organize the steel industry in 1918-1919 came from the Chicago Federation, led by Foster and Fitzpatrick, and not from the administration of the Federation. But coupled with these was another important factor, namely that a large section of the movement was not interested in extending organization among the unorganized and unskilled because it felt that it had nothing to win and something to lose by that step. Why this is so is answered differently for different organizations. Some unions, as is well known, definitely restrict membership by high dues, etc., so as to monopolize a field of work for themselves. Many unions have barred negroes and women from their ranks. For decades, the cigarmakers, partly because of their fight against machinery, kept out of their organization all machine workers. In many instances, where the skilled crafts are organized and are not dependent upon the unskilled workers to maintain their position, they have felt no incentive to organize the latter. Why should they tax themselves with high dues in order to do missionary work among the unskilled? They may even feel that they stand to lose thereby, for attempts to organize the unskilled may result in an unsettlement of the industry through strikes. Also, often there is present a feeling that the unskilled, if organized into their union, may overwhelm them, wrest away control of the union, and adopt policies injurious to their interests. Saposs has pointed out how the Union Label has in some cases had

the effect of making unions forego organization of the unorganized. To some unions, as for instance the United Garment Workers and the Cigarmakers, the label has been an important device by which the union has maintained itself. But the demand for labelled goods is a limited one. Consequently, if more workers are organized, the value of the label to the first manufacturers shrinks and they become less willing to stay organized.

On the whole, there is a deep cleavage of interests between the skilled and the unskilled, and so long as the skilled can raise or maintain their standards as a group, they are apt to remain indifferent to the status of the unskilled, and to feel no compunction to organize them. This is true of the rank and file as well as the leaders of such groups. Thus, in the case of the cigarmakers, the question of whether the restrictive rules of the union which excluded machine workers should be done away with was submitted to the rank and file and overwhelmingly rejected.

But even where the rank and file of the skilled look favorably upon organization of the unskilled, their leaders have in some cases frowned upon it. Oftentimes these leaders are averse to admitting new groups into the union for fear that by so doing their political regime may be overthrown. This is especially true where the potential members are of different racial origin, and tainted or inclined towards radicalism. " The inclination of the immigrant ", says Saposs, " towards radical doctrines made leaders of the existing unions chary of accepting them as members." [1]

During the period from 1907-1917, the socialists were influential in a number of unions, and their rising strength was manifested in the defeat of the conservative leaders. Thus in 1911, the socialists captured the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and replaced the conservative leaders

[1] Saposs, D. J., *Left Wing Unionism*, p. 114.

with avowed radicals. The capturing of the International Journeymen Tailors' Union by the socialists resulted in the displacement as president of John B. Lennon, treasurer and member of the executive board of the Federation. When the socialists came into control of the Machinists' Union, the result was that the president, O'Connell, also a member of the executive board of the Federation, went into the discard. "With these examples before them," writes Saposs,

> and with a radical ferment in their own ranks, the casual interest of some leaders in organizing the immigrants who were presumably radicals was turned into outright reluctance. From formal interviews and incidental conversation during this period, it was evident that the conservative labor leaders felt determined that the American Federation of Labor must not permit itself to be swamped by immigrants. Organizing the unorganized immigrants so widely impregnated with radicalism or so readily susceptible to it would be merely enlisting followers for a cause which the old officials abominated and considered the very antithesis of their ideals and aspirations, and would strengthen their dangerous and able rivals, who were aiming to replace them.[1]

Perlman, in a recent book, comments upon the same attitude in some leaders. He concludes his survey of the present-day movement by calling attention to the "psychology of a big majority of its leaders today—a curious blending of defeatism with complacency." These leaders admit that organization must penetrate into the basic industries, but their efforts in this direction have been largely confined to passing paper resolutions or to half-hearted attempts given up at the first encounter with opposition.

Thereupon, having gone through the motions of organizing in

[1] Saposs, *op. cit.*, pp. 115-116.

new fields, and thus eased their organizer's conscience, the same leaders settle down to a smug survey of the well oiled machinery of their little organizations, which suggests at least a suspicion that these leaders might not entirely welcome too many new members whose alignment in the politics of the union would at least be uncertain.[1]

What relationship did Gompers have to all this? What was his attitude towards the organization of the unorganized, the unskilled and the immigrants? Is it possible that he tacitly shared the hesitation of some of the old guard leaders to organize the unorganized—and for identical reasons? He held his office, which he dearly wanted to keep until he died, by virtue of the alignments of then existent union groups. If the attitude and officials of various unions were to be changed, as seemed likely with the entrance of new, more radical groups into these unions, would not his hold upon the presidency of the Federation be rendered precarious? It is the opinion of the writer that such was not his attitude. Rather, he wanted to see all labor organized, and used such influence as he had to secure this. To the restrictive rules of unions, rules which kept out women, negroes, unskilled, or which simply limited the membership by one device or another, he was as a general rule opposed—that is as much as he dared to be. It must be remembered that as president of the Federation he had little influence or control over these matters; he could not dictate to union officials. In a way, therefore, it did not matter very much what his attitude was. But in so far as he could influence trade-union policies along this line, that is by advice, persuasion, education, he was for the setting aside of these restrictions and for organizing the workers, but all within the limits of discretion. In this matter, he was as progressive as he dared

[1] Perlman, Selig, *A Theory of the Labor Movement* [New York, 1928], p. 232.

to be. Having put himself on the opposite side of the fence from the socialists, he founded his regime on the least progressive elements within the Federation. To continue in office, he had to retain the support of these groups, and could not hold out for any policies which ran counter to those they saw fit to hold. Probably he justified himself, as politicians have done before, in not intransigently advocating the sweeping away of restrictive rules, and the pushing forward of organizing campaigns, by believing that if he did so he would be overthrown and replaced by someone less progressive than himself. Holding the leadership of a going concern like the Federation entailed the making of one compromise after another between expediency and principles.

TRADE AUTONOMY

Gompers' philosophy of voluntarism, as was shown in the previous chapter, encompassed the relations which he thought ought to exist between the Federation and the unions that compose it. He was entirely satisfied with the present Federation, a very loose association of unions, too loose in the opinion of many to be effective as a national organization. He wanted it to remain what it is now, a voluntary body, one which affords to its component unions complete sovereignty in managing their affairs. In other words, he believed firmly in the principle of trade autonomy. It was his conviction that only by adhering to this principle, by refusing to exercise or to attempt to exercise compulsion over the individual unions, could the Federation avoid disruption. So firmly did he believe this, that he made it the theme of his last message to the Federation.

> So long [he said] as we have held fast to voluntary principles . . . we have sustained our forward progress. . . . Where we have blundered into trying to force a policy or a decision, even though wise and right, we have impeded, if not interrupted the realization of our aims. . . .

. . . There is no way whereby our labor movement may be assured sustained progress in determining its policies and its plans other than sincere democratic deliberation until a UNANIMOUS decision is reached.

Probably the majority of the leaders of the unions would agree with this statement. But at the same time, and while the principle of trade autonomy has not been overtly challenged by the setting up of a contrary principle, in practice the Federation has shown an increasing tendency to depart from it.

To understand why Gompers held so firmly to the principle of voluntarism, or trade autonomy, one must go back, as in other instances, to certain early experiences as a result of which this principle was first formulated. In the first place, it was just this principle that was the rallying cry of the trade unions against the Knights of Labor. Threatened with domination by the Knights, the national unions came together and formed the Federation so as to fight the better for their independence. And having escaped from the domination of one body, the unions were not ready to hand over their sovereignty to another. It is, accordingly, impossible to read through the literature of these years and not be struck by the emphasis laid upon trade autonomy, the jealous concern of the unions for their independence, and the care which Gompers, as president of the Federation, took to assure unions, whether affiliated or not, that membership involved no renunciation of their entire freedom to manage their affairs as they willed. "The American Federation of Labor", Gompers wrote shortly after the formation of that body,

has made it the cardinal principle to declare, maintain and secure the autonomy of every trade and labor union in the exercise of their right to regulate the matters connected with their respective

trades and the transaction of their business uninterfered with by any " supreme ", " grand ", " mysterious " power.[1]

In a letter Gompers writes that the American Federation of Labor

is an organization composed chiefly of National and International Unions which are joined together for the purpose of maintaining the right to do as they think is just and proper in the matter of their own trades, without the let or hindrance of any other body of men, to insist upon the regulation of their own affairs as particular trades.[2]

So jealous were the unions of their autonomy that Gompers in persuading new unions to come in, or in extolling the virtues of the Federation to old ones, would boast of the very looseness of the Federation, of the very frailness of the ties that bound the unions to it. Thus in describing the Federation for McNeill's book on the Labor Movement in 1890, he wrote:

I believe the most potent factors in maintaining and perpetuating the Federation are the very slight cords that bind the organization to it. As a consequence of this apparently frail compact, the officers are not endowed with powers, which if vested in them would or might be exercised to the detriment of any affiliated union. Then again, the officers, even if disposed to be dictatorial, would soon find few or none to dictate to; hence, they are extremely careful not to offend by self assertion. The A. F. of L. is ruled by affection, by a recognition of the identity of interests of all wage earners . . . [3]

But even this abnegation of authority was not enough to induce the railroad brotherhoods to affiliate with the Federation.

[1] *Trade Union Advocate*, July, 1887.

[2] Letter to D. Mather, April 22, 1887.

[3] McNeill, J., *The Labor Movement* [New York, 1890], p. 596a.

Thus at the very outset, trade autonomy was erected into a cardinal principle of the Federation, given a place of greater importance than it would have been if the chief stimulus to its formation had come from any other circumstance than the conflict with the Knights. But in the course of the next decade and a half, this principle of autonomy, of voluntarism, the attitude of regarding the Federation as a voluntary body, was further driven home to Gompers by the very character of his work. He was working to extend and build up trade unionism, to establish firmly the Federation. He was organizing local unions, giving them advice and suggestions. He was bringing them together into national unions, then nursing these national bodies, watching over them, advising their officers, writing to their officials, urging as diplomatically as he could the performance of duties and the following of constructive policies. He helped organize city centrals and state federations. The Federation itself was but a rope of sand. During those years, there were many times when it seemed on the point of falling to pieces. Organizations drifted in and out. For some slight reason or no reason at all, unions would withdraw from the Federation. Organizations had not yet come to the point where they took membership as a matter of course, and held to the Federation in fair weather and foul. The habit of affiliation had to be engendered. It took much tending. And all of this work, work which Gompers tackled with the spirit of a crusader, was of a voluntary character. The Federation had to prove itself by results. He had to win men to cooperation by the sterling quality of his advice, by the very fire of his own zeal. He could only persuade and advise and lead. He could not compel men to follow the course he thought best. It was but natural, therefore, that work of this sort engendered and fostered in him a certain attitude of mind. He could not exercise compulsion; compulsion did not work. There-

fore, the idea of compulsion became repugnant to him. On the other hand, having learned to induce cooperation, having achieved so much through voluntary methods, he became an apostle of voluntarism.

Later on, as the Federation became more stable and stronger, it made attempts to apply coercion to individual unions. On the whole, Gompers disapproved of these attempts, and to his mind their results justified his attitude. Thus, in the first years of the century, the brewery workers came into conflict with the firemen and engineers by organizing men of these crafts working in breweries. Gompers, it may be said, sided with the firemen and engineers, i.e., with the craft principle. Finally, after much hauling back and forth, the Executive Council, over Gompers' protest, handed down a decision mandatory for the disputants. This the brewery workers refused to accept. Whereupon, the Federation, realizing that a continuation of this policy would have meant disintegration, recanted, and although the brewery workers still refused to accept its decision, returned their charter. These circumstances lead Gompers shortly afterwards to lecture the convention upon the necessity of holding by the principles of trade autonomy. In his report to the 1907 convention he said:

> At the New Orleans convention . . . a resolution of a mandatory character was adopted applying to an International Union. . . . In so far as the case in point is concerned, there may have been some justification, but in itself the influence exerted by that policy has not operated and cannot operate to the success and permanency of the labor movement. . . .
>
> In recognizing all the great work and good achieved for labor by the Federation, we must bear in mind that in the last analysis we ought not to depart from the conception of the fact that to the International Unions belong all power not specifically delegated to the Federation.

. . . It is our bounden duty to come near to the first essential principle upon which our Federation is founded; that is, to afford and guarantee to all affiliated international unions the largest liberty of action consistent with the general well being of all labor.[1]

It also seemed to Gompers that such attempts as the Federation had made to bring pressure upon organizations so as to effect amalgamations, had been unsuccessful. "Our experience," he said, "has demonstrated that drastic efforts to prematurely bring workmen of kindred trades into cooperation or amalgamations has aroused greater hostility and resentment and driven them further apart." [2]

But, to repeat, in spite of these factors, the Federation has tended more and more to hand down decisions mandatory to separate unions, especially small ones, and thus in practice to depart from the principle of trade autonomy. Here, as in other matters, Gompers compromised when he had to, and went along with the majority. But he compromised with reluctance.

[1] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1907, p. 45.

[2] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1906, p. 14.

CHAPTER VIII

International Affairs and Policies

This chapter concerns itself with Gompers' ideas and policies in the field of international, as distinct from national, labor affairs, i.e., his attitude towards immigration restriction, his ideas regarding peace and internationalism, his policies during the World War, his attitude towards the Treaty and the League of Nations, and finally his policies with regard to the International Trade Union Movement and Pan American Labor.

IMMIGRATION

There was never any question either with Gompers or the Federation as to the desirability of restricting Chinese immigration. During the seventies the cigarmakers felt themselves suffering from the competition of Chinese cigarmakers on the Pacific Coast, and became interested in securing national legislation preventing further immigration. Indeed this desire was one of the reasons for the eagerness of the Cigarmakers' Union to form a national labor organization.[1]

When a Federation was formed in 1881 Chinese exclusion was immediately made one of its legislative demands.

[1] Gompers writes in his autobiography: "In 1878, of forty thousand cigarmarkers in the entire country at least ten thousand were Chinamen employed in the cigar industry on the Pacific Coast. . . . Unless protective measures were taken, it was evident the whole industry would soon be "Chinaized". . . . This was an element in deciding the cigarmakers to give early and hearty endorsement to the movement for a national organization of labor unions for the help of all wage earners was needed in support of Chinese exclusion." Vol. i, pp. 216-7.

Racial prejudice and the much lower living standards of the Orientals resulted in the policy of Chinese exclusion being accepted by the organized workers almost as a matter of course. It was otherwise with general immigration restriction. "I approached the immigration problem," Gompers writes,

with the somewhat mixed feelings of one who has been an immigrant himself. Grateful that no barriers prevented my coming to this country, I have always felt that restricting opportunities for others is a grave responsibility; yet as the number of immigrants rapidly increased and the admixture of various races was too rapid for assimilation, I could not escape the conclusion that some way must be found to safeguard America.[1]

But by 1891 the desire for protection from the flood of immigrant job-seekers had conquered his sentiments of generosity and unselfishness. That it was a decision reached only after searchings of conscience, and one about which he felt badly, was evidenced by the reasons he found to support his course. Thus in his report to the 1891 convention, he said:

I view the immigrant problem not from the mere selfish standpoint of our own protection, but I am persuaded that it not only tends to destroy the independence, progress and advancement of our people, but also is an efficient means by which the effete institutions of some of the European countries are perpetuated and thus economical, political and social reforms postponed or avoided.[2]

In my judgment the delegates to this convention representing

[1] Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, vol. ii, pp. 153-4.

[2] Gompers puts this argument more clearly elsewhere: "Since each country had its distinctive part in the establishment of institutions of world freedom, there was need for those devoted to the cause to remain within their own countries and help in national struggles." *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, vol. ii, p. 157.

the organized wage workers of our country should voice their sentiments in unmistakable tones, and declare that we will have relief from this pressing evil.[1]

Like Gompers, the Federation approached the immigration problem reluctantly, and at the beginning in a somewhat apologetic frame of mind. Pressed by Gompers, one convention after another debated the matter. At last, in 1903, the Federation, after several changes of mind, went finally on record as demanding legislation restricting immigration. Thereupon, Gompers lobbied assiduously for such a law, attaining his end in the Wilson administration.

PEACE AND THE WORLD WAR

Gompers was much broader in his interests than the majority of the Federation leaders. Most of them reflected the provincialism, the belief in American self-sufficiency that characterized American feeling before the war. Accordingly, in so far as the Federation interested itself in international affairs and international labor, it was in most cases at the behest, and as a result of the prodding, of its president. This is true of such interest in the peace movement as the Federation displayed before the war.

Gompers himself in the pre-war decade was quite internationally minded, a pacifist, and ardently interested in the cause of international peace. His various reports to the Federation reflected this. As early as 1899 he had tied up the ideal of international peace and amity with the international trade-union movement, and could speak of international peace as being one of the missions of organized labor. "The preservation of the Peace of the World," he remarks in his 1900 report, " devolves more and more upon organized labor." [2] And " of all the forces at work for the

[1] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1891, p. 15.

[2] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1900, p. 13.

establishment of rightful relations among the people of the civilized world, none," he concludes in the report of the following year, "is so potent as the trade union."[1] A few years later he threw out the hint of a general strike in the event of war:

> May we not [he said] look forward to the time, have we not the right to hope that, all other means failing, the wage earners of the world will be so thoroughly organized and will understand their interests so well, that they will refuse to permit themselves to be arrayed against their brother workmen of another country for the purpose of serving the machinations of tyrants, whether political or commercial. . . . Organized labor stands for peace, industrial as well as international.[2]

When the Spanish-American War broke out, he was much concerned lest this event augured that the United States was embarking on a policy of imperialism and militarism, and joined with others in a protest against that trend. He exerted such influence as he had against the annexation of Hawaii and the Philippines. That annexation would bring several millions of Malays, Philippinos, Chinese and Japanese into competition with American workmen for American jobs, made him but see the injustice of this step the more clearly. When the Russian Czar proposed the setting up of an international court for the arbitration of disputes, he hailed the idea with delight. When in 1913 Winston Churchill put forward the proposal of a naval holiday, he waxed enthusiastic, and endeavored through the International Federation of Trade Unions to have the various labor movements urge their governments to adopt the suggestion. When the war broke out, a book of his addresses on the subject of peace was about to be published by the Carnegie Peace Foundation. Such was his attitude.

[1] A. F. of L., *op. cit.*, 1901, p. 20.

[2] *Ibid.*, 1905, pp. 20-21.

The coming of the war changed all this. He withdrew his intended volume; deserted the peace movement; it had become for the time being, impracticable. Steadily, although at the same time, maintaining a studiously official neutrality, his sympathies for the allies mounted. By 1916, if the *post facto* utterances of his autobiography may be trusted, he was convinced that sooner or later Germany would commit the overt act which would bring the United States into the war. Accordingly, he became an advocate of preparedness. Now, the pacifist movement, peace societies and the rest became suspect as being inspired by German interests, and he urged labor to have no traffic with them. So well had he made his position known that when President Wilson appointed his Council of National Defense in December 1916, Gompers was made its labor representative.

THE WAR

With the first months of 1917, as it became more and more certain that the United States would be drawn into the war, it became necessary for labor to define its attitude towards that eventuality and to decide as to the role it wished to play. Gompers had thought deeply about the matter. "All during the war period," he later wrote, "I had been turning over in my mind how I could best perform my duty to the American wage earners to lead them aright and to protect their interest."[1] He had before him the experiences of British and French labor. These movements, unprepared, had been swept from their moorings by the war. Suspicious of their governments, they had accepted the war dubiously, and had not offered a whole-hearted cooperation. As a result, their governments, at least at the beginning, had been equally hesitant in giving the labor movements voice and representation in the arrangement of affairs. Furthermore, in many in-

[1] *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, vol. ii, p. 359.

stances labor had sacrificed to the winning of the war treasured rights and standards gained only after decades of struggle. It was necessary for American labor to profit by their experience. In a letter to the Executive Council, Gompers put the matter in a nutshell:

> There are two ways in which the matter can be approached, either with the aid and cooperation of Labor, with Labor's representatives maintaining certain ideals of human welfare that are just as essential to national defense as any military purpose or if Labor should hold aloof from the entire situation, plans will be adopted by those out of touch with the labor movement, and out of sympathy with the needs and ideals of the workers. In other words, duties and service in connection with national defense will be imposed upon the workers without asking their advice in formulating these plans, or Labor can make this an opportunity for emphasizing the tremendous service that it renders to society both in peace and in war, and insisting upon a helpful guiding voice in the determination of affairs that so vitally affect the masses.[1]

It was a difficult situation, one requiring able leadership. Gompers saw the situation clearly, more clearly than most of the labor chieftains, and supplied that leadership. On his own initiative he sent out a call to the leaders of the various unions to assemble in Washington, D. C. on March 12th, 1917. These leaders, after a day's deliberations, adopted a declaration which Gompers had placed ready-made before them. In this declaration, the labor movement pledged its support to the government, should the United States enter the war. But, the declaration went on to say, "the government must recognize the organized labor movement as the agency through which it must cooperate with the wage earners."

In return for its support and cooperation, the government

[1] *American Federationist*, April, 1917, p. 271.

must grant to the labor movement representation in the important agencies for the direction and administration of war affairs. Too, the declaration said, under the guise of national necessity, labor must not be stripped of its advantages and protections gained through long struggles. Union standards must be the standards for war work.[1]

For the next two years, organized labor reaped the bountiful harvest of that foresight and that shrewd bargain.

The United States a belligerent, Gompers flung himself into war activities. He helped tremendously in "selling" the war to the laboring people throughout the country. Pro-war radicals he organized into the Alliance for Labor and Democracy, and used this organization to smother the disaffection of unsympathetic radicals. Wilson appointed him a member of the all-important Council of Labor and Defense. Towards the close of the war, he was sent abroad by this government, acting on the request of the allied governments, to revive the spirits of the laboring masses of those countries who were becoming war-wearied and recalcitrant. While in England he effectively checked such plans as the British socialists had for convening an International Socialist Congress and negotiating for peace through this means over the head of their government. Truly, the quantity of work which he accomplished during this period was enormous.

In return for these valued services, Gompers came into a prestige and recognition beyond anything he could have formerly dreamed of. In 1917 President Wilson paid the Federation the signal honor of addressing it in convention, and in the course of his remarks gave the highest compliment to its leader. "If I may be permitted to do so," he said, "I want to express my admiration of his patriotic courage, his large vision, and his statesmanlike sense of what has to be done. I like to lay my mind alongside of a mind that knows

[1] *American Federationist, op. cit.*, pp. 270-281.

how to pull in harness. The horses that kick over the traces will have to be put in a corral." [1] On Gompers' return from his mission abroad, the *Literary Digest,* expressing a common opinion, called him the second most important man in the country. There was not an important official to whom he did not have easy access; he was closer to Wilson than many of the latter's cabinet members.

It may be asked why this pre-war pacifist flung himself with such enthusiasm into the prosecution of war activities, why he took the war so earnestly, looking upon it as a holy crusade. That by so doing he won prestige and gains for the labor movement was one reason, of course, and probably the most important. Another was that he utterly and sincerely believed—as he wished to believe—that the war was being fought to save and extend democratic institutions, and to prevent German domination over all. Too, of a highly emotional nature, he was much wrought up by the stories of German atrocities. But there were, undoubtedly, also reasons of a more intimate nature. Inherently Gompers was a fighter. Before the war, to be a pacifist was to maintain a belligerent position. When the war did break out, Gompers, habitually devoted to continuous conflict, would have found it difficult to do anything else than to mix joyously in it. Then along with this was the fact that all his life Gompers had been fighting against the current. Now the war gave him an opportunity to fight side by side with the rest. He expressed this feeling in the closing pages of his autobiography, in sentences that have an almost pathetic tone:

To me the War had been a crusade inspired by concern for the higher welfare of humanity and glorifying the spirit of service. I had flung myself into the cause without reservation, happy to find myself in harmony with so many. All my life has been a fight and it has so often been my duty to say that

[1] Quoted in *Seventy Years of Life and Labor,* vol. ii, p. 385.

which but few wanted to hear. It was a real comfort for once in my life to find my purposes understood and appreciated.[1]

THE TREATY AND THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

Practically from the beginning of the World War, Gompers had cherished the hope that he might play an important part in the treaty-making process at the close of the conflict, a hope that was bound up with his aspiration to take a leading role in the post-war reestablishment of the international trade-union organization. At the 1914 convention of the Federation he had recommended that the Federation empower its officers to call a conference of the trade-union centers after the war at the same time and place as the Peace Conference. In 1917, just as labor abroad had framed its various charters which were to be incorporated in the peace treaty, so did the American Federation of Labor, under Gompers' hand, formulate its peace demands and declarations. Gompers even went so far as to demand at the 1917 convention that "the government of the United States provide adequate and direct representation of wage earners among the plenipotentiaries sent to the Peace Congress" and urged the labor movements of other countries to take like action.

This last demand was not fulfilled. It was a great blow to him when President Wilson, contrary to general anticipations, failed to appoint him a member of this country's Peace Commission. However, after the peace conversations had begun, and when in order to dispel the rising labor unrest it was decided to incorporate special labor clauses in the treaty, and to set up an international labor organization, Gompers was appointed by Wilson one of the two American representatives on the Commission set up for this task—the Commission on International Labor Legislation. As chair-

[1] Vol. ii, p. 513.

man of this Commission, Gompers played a most important role in the framing of the Labor Conventions of the Treaty, and the establishment of the present International Labor Organization.

For Gompers to direct the deliberations of the Commission along lines that seemed feasible, practical and good to him, was no easy task. He had to fight every inch of the way. "I never was placed in all my life," he afterwards revealed, "in such an awkward and uncomfortable position as I was for nine-tenths of the time that I was presiding . . . I found myself in a minority on nearly every proposition." [1] The main conflicts came over the question of the powers and function of the International Labor Organization. The continental and British delegates had in mind the establishment of a sort of super-state composed of delegates of the various governments and representatives of the national labor and employing groups, these people to meet together in assembly and frame conventions which the various countries were bound to accept and to enact into law. This meant, of course, the abrogation of national sovereignty. Gompers realized only too well what short consideration the American Senate would give to this proposal, and how it violated American governmental principles, as for instance the Constitutional limitations upon Congress, and the principle of states' rights. After bringing the Commission to the verge of a split, Gompers finally won his point, which was, substantially, that the conventions of the International Labor Organization should possess the character not of mandates but of recommendations. Thus Gompers succeeded in incorporating in the International Labor Organization as its leading principle that principle of voluntarism which had come to be a "leit-motif" of his philosophy. A second important point of conflict was over the number and votes of govern-

[1] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1919, p. 411.

mental representatives in the International Labor Organization, Gompers wishing to restrict their power, believing that they would be unsympathetic to labor claims. Here it was clearly shown how Gompers' attitude towards government differed from that of the other labor leaders. Although posessing implicit confidence in the international policies of Wilson, he was distrustful of the government when it came to labor legislation. The British and Continental leaders, on the other hand, while thoroughly suspicious of the war aims and motives of their governments, nevertheless had sufficient confidence in their own political power to put power over labor standards in the hands of the government. The third point for which Gompers fought, and against almost all the rest of the Commission, was that the International Labor Organization should not propose to any country a law or convention which embodied standards lower than already existed in that country, this in order to protect the advanced standards of America.

The Commission, having finished its labors with regard to the composition, set-up and functions of the International Labor Organization, turned next to the drafting of the various declarations and principles to be specifically set forth in the Treaty. Here Gompers put before the Commission a number of declarations along the lines of the 1917 Peace Declarations of the Federation and sought to have these included in the Treaty.[1] while on their side the other labor representatives brought forward the various provisions enunciated at the Bern Socialist and Labor Conference held a few months previously, provisions known as the Bern Charter.[2]

[1] Perigord, P., *The International Labor Organization* [New York, 1926], pp. 72-112.

[2] In part, the two sets of declarations, i. e., Gompers' and the Bern Charter, were identical. However, Gompers' declarations contained no references to social insurance, which the Charter demanded, while on the

Although Gompers fought strongly for the adoption of his 'declarations' only a certain number of them were adopted by the Commission, which in its final draft set forth a list of some nine declarations of leading principles which the signing powers were recommended to apply. They were: that labor should not be regarded as a commodity, the right of association for employers and workers for lawful purposes, payment of an adequate living wage, the adoption of an eight-hour day and forty-eight hour week, a weekly rest period of at least 24 hours, the abolition of child labor, men and women to receive equal pay for equal work, equitable treatment of alien workers, provision for a system of inspection to insure enforcement of laws.[1]

With the adoption of these declarations, the Commission finished its labors and the draft convention was submitted to the Peace Commission. But a disappointment was in store for Gompers. For, when the draft convention emerged from the discussions of the Peace Commission as Part XIII of the Treaty, it was found that many of the labor declarations had been so emasculated as to be almost meaningless. To take but one instance: the declaration that labor should not be regarded as a commodity became " . . . labor should not be regarded *merely* as a commodity or article of commerce." [2]

Although thoroughly disappointed at this outcome, nevertheless Gompers sponsored the Treaty and did his best to secure its ratification. His own commitment to it and his

other hand the Charter said nothing about a number of "rights", bearing upon the freedom of workers to act upon the economic field, which Gompers considered extremely important. The distinctively American demands, then, were: labor not to be considered an article of commerce, prohibition of involuntary servitude, right of trial by jury, right of free speech, free press, free assembly, and the right of seamen to leave their vessels in safe harbor.

[1] Perigord, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-112.

[2] Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, vol. ii, pp. 494-500.

loyalty to President Wilson were important factors behind his sponsorship. Equally important was the fact that he approved of the League of Nations, and valued it highly as a machinery by which future wars might be prevented. As for the labor provisions, the Treaty, he argued, "was not perfect, but it was far in advance of any other of similar character. In addition for the first time in history, the rights, interests and welfare of workers received specific recognition in an international treaty." [1]

THE INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

As in the war and peace moves of the Federation, so in the Federation's relationships with the international trade-union movement Gompers was very much the leader. By and large the other leaders of the Federation, their minds closely trained on home and trade affairs, bothered little about the affairs of labor in other countries, or the Federation's connection with these movements. Throughout his life, Gompers, on the other hand, took a close interest in world labor. And it was under his guiding hand that before the war American labor gradually built up closer and closer connections with the international trade-union movement and, during the war and immediate post-war years, endeavored to capture the leadership of this world movement.

Gompers' interests in forming contacts with the labor movements of other countries were demonstrated almost at the birth of the Federation. Thus in his report to the 1887 convention he suggested that the A. F. of L. send representatives to a world labor congress which the British Trade Union Congress was proposing to hold. His suggestion, however, was not well received by the frail and impoverished Federation, which voted that the workingmen of America be

[1] Gompers, S., "Why the Peace Treaty Should be Ratified," pamphlet issued by A. F. of L., 1919.

united first before attempts be made to unite with labor abroad.[1] In the succeeding years, Gompers did the best he could to establish relationships with the British and continental labor movements. Although the Federation, probably through lack of funds, was unable to be represented at the International Socialist Congresses held in Paris in 1889, nevertheless Gompers on behalf of the Federation sent fraternal greetings to both. Indirectly, too, Gompers was responsible for the inauguration of the Socialist May Day. For in his letters to these Congresses, he called attention to the campaign for the eight-hour day that the Federation was launching on May 1st, 1890. The delegates thereupon voted to hold an international manifestation on that day.[2]

The following years were crucial ones in the history of the Federation's international relationships. In his report to the 1889 convention of the Federation, Gompers had recommended that the Federation invite the various labor movements to hold their international Congress in this country in 1893. This proposal was endorsed by the Federation and Gompers issued the invitations, renewing them in the following year. But the Federation's invitations were not accepted, and eventually, much to Gompers' regret, it was forced to abandon the project. Gompers laid the blame for this failure partly to the fact that the A. F. of L. had sent no delegates to the previous Congresses, but mostly " to the misrepresentation of the American Federation of Labor by one who was excluded " from the 1890 convention of the Federation.[3] It will be remembered that in 1890 the Federation had refused to grant representation in its councils to the Socialist Labor Party. That act, as reported to the continental labor movements by Lucien Sanial, the excluded delegate, had gained the

[1] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1887, p. 26.

[2] Lorwin, L., *Labor and Internationalism*, p. 71.

[3] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1891, p. 13.

A. F. of L. considerable ill will and ill repute; this in spite of Gompers' efforts to counteract it by writing to Engels and others putting forth his side of the affair.

The rebuff thus given Gompers had most important consequences. For, as Lorwin says:

> This incident was the spark which exploded the hostility of Gompers and the American Federation of Labor to the Second International. From that time on, Gompers began to draw a sharp line between the trade union and the socialist movements, and he became eager to establish a purely trade-union international organization, distinct from, if not in opposition to the Second International.[1]

In spite of this set-back, Gompers in the following years continued his efforts to establish closer contacts with the international trade-union movement, that is, in so far as it could be distingushed from the socialist movement. This was manifested in various ways. In 1894, for instance, he helped to inaugurate the practice of exchanging fraternal delegates with the British Trade Union Congress, a practice which ever since has been faithfully adhered to. In a number of instances the Federation at the instigation of Gompers came to the help of distressed organizations abroad with financial aid. When various trade unions in this country undertook to accept members from abroad without initiation fees, and established an interchange of working cards, he expressed gratification, and urged other unions to follow this course. Likewise he urged upon the various national and international unions that they establish contacts with the unions of their trade abroad, and join the International Secretariats of their trade. Perhaps, however, the most important evidence of this determination to draw American labor and other labor movements closer together was in 1908-9 when Gompers

[1] Lorwin, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-120.

took steps to bring the American Federation of Labor into the International Secretariat of Trade Unions, which had been established in 1903.[1] In 1909 Gompers had attended the Conference of the Secretariat, held in Paris. He was not altogether pleased with what he saw of it. Socialists and intellectuals wielded too great an influence in it. He found its philosophy socialistic and hostile to true trade unionism. Yet in his report to the 1909 convention, Gompers urged affiliation.

> I am fully persuaded [he said] and have no hesitancy in recommending that though the International Secretariat leaves much to be desired, yet the best interests of the workers of America will be served by our adherence thereto. Financially the costs would be but small, and the substantial benefits would be of necessity exceedingly meagre, yet the spirit of international fraternity would be immeasurable. Our adherence would hasten the establishment of an International Federation of Labor.[1]

The Federation, following Gompers' recommendation, voted to affiliate, and then under Gompers' leadership essayed during the next few years to play a more and more prominent part in the international movement.

Thus at the commencement of the war, Gompers had brought the Federation into close contact with the international labor movement. Now, during the war and immediate post-war years, he definitely reached out for leadership and dominancy in this movement.

The war broke up for all practical purposes the International Federation of Trade Unions. It was Gompers' hope, conceived almost at the beginning of the war, that he, leader of the labor movement of a neutral country, might

[1] See Lorwin, *Labor and Internationalism*, pp. 117-133.

[2] American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1909, p. 39.

play the leading role in the reestablishment of the I. F. T. U. after the war. It was partly with this in mind that Gompers suggested at the December 1914 convention of the American Federation of Labor that the convention empower its officers to call, if they saw fit, a conference of the various trade-union movements at the close of the war, at the time and place of the Peace Conference. During the next few years, in his correspondence with the Allied labor leaders, he pressed this proposal upon them.

Another incident quite overtly demonstrated Gompers' ambition to achieve leadership of the international movement. During 1915, when the matter of transferring the headquarters of the I. F. T. U. from Germany to a neutral country was under discussion, Gompers suggested that it be moved to this country.[1] This suggestion the officers of the various movements turned down summarily and coldly.

The entrance of the United States into the war reinforced Gompers' ambition to achieve leadership in the international trade-union movement, and at the same time made more difficult his path to that end. Gompers' importance during the war, his war activities, his mission of encouragement to foreign labor, all conspired to make him believe that he was destined to take a stellar role in the affairs of the international trade-union movement after the war. But at the same time, with the United States in the war, a breach rapidly opened between the English and French movements and the American movement.

During the first year of the war, English and French labor had been almost as patriotic, as belligerent, as convinced of the righteousness of their cause, as was Gompers during the year and a half of this country's participation in the conflict. But three years of the fighting had made them war-weary, less patriotic, suspicious of their governments' war aims. This

[1] *American Federationist*, November, 1915, pp. 938-9.

feeling manifested itself in the rise of a sentiment for holding an international labor conference as a way of achieving peace. By the late summer of 1917, the movement of " on to Stockholm " (the site of the proposed international socialist conference) had assumed formidable proportions. Socialists of all the important warring countries had accepted invitations. The American labor movement, alone, stood out against the plan, while Gompers denounced the whole idea as " insidious pro-Kaiser propaganda." [1]

The breach between Gompers and European labor thus opened widened with the end of the war, when attempts were set on foot to resurrect the international trade-union organization. Immediately after the armistice, Gompers began to plan for an international labor conference. It was necessary to act quickly for " it was obvious that if constructive leadership did not at once assume the responsibility, ' radical ' groups would take the initiative." [2] But while Gompers was manoeuvring to see if a labor conference could be held at Paris, British labor stole a march on him; a call was issued by Arthur Henderson for an international trade-union and socialist conference, the place and date being ultimately fixed for Bern, Switzerland, and on February 2, 1919.

During the next few weeks Gompers did his utmost to bring about an international labor conference at Paris and under the auspices, as it were, of the American Federation of Labor. He had two strong reasons for wishing the conference to be held at Paris. In the first place he felt that its deliberations must be protected from a Bolshevik stampede.[3] Secondly, still ridden by war emotions and vindictive, he

was absolutely unwilling to consider an international conference

[1] The conference was never held as the American, French and British governments refused to grant passports to the socialist delegates.

[2] *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, vol. ii, p. 474.

[3] *Ibid.*, vol. ii, p. 475.

held anywhere else than the meeting place of the Peace Congress where labor representatives of enemy countries would be upon the same footing in our deliberations as diplomatic representatives would occupy in the Peace Congress.[1]

But Gompers' hopes went astray. Certain practical difficulties and the coolness of the continental labor movements to himself and the American Federation of Labor frustrated his plans; labor flocked instead to the Bern Conference. Thus defeated, he left the field altogether to the victors, absolutely refusing to attend the Bern Conference on the ground that it was a socialist, political gathering, held under the leadership of those whose policies were opposed to the policies of the American Federation of Labor.

The defeat of Gompers' hopes and plans to take the leadership in reestablishing the international trade-union body and to model it in respect to its philosophy and make-up after the American Federation of Labor was even more clearly brought home at the Amsterdam trade-union conference, held to reestablish the International Federation of Trade Unions. At this conference, the lines were clearly drawn between Europe and Gompers. On practically all the important issues, Gompers found himself in a minority, and was forced to give way. Thus, all the delegates, the British and Americans excepted, severely criticized the Labor Clauses of the Treaty, on the grounds of the discrepancies between these declarations and the Labor Charter drawn up at Bern. Legien, the German leader, even went to the length of insinuating that any man who acquiesced in these discrepancies must be in the pay of the capitalists. After Gompers had risen to defend the labor clauses, the Austrian delegate reminded him that he was now addressing a labor group, not a group of employers. Finally, after much debate, the Congress voted that " it can-

[1] *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, vol. ii, p. 475.

not accept as the full expression of the demand of the working classes of all countries the clauses of the Charter of Labor as contained in the Treaty of Versailles." [1] In this matter, the differences between Gompers' mentality and that of the European leaders was clearly evident. Gompers, incredibly patient, intensely practical, doggedly fighting for one step further, and then still another step, his eyes fixedly on the ground so as to be sure of his footing, valued highly each step of progress. They, with their eyes fixed on the far-away star of a socialist commonwealth, valued too, each step forward, but at the same time were almost contemptuous of it, because it reminded them of how much further they had to go.

The delegates were more critical of the League of Nations than Gompers would have wished, holding that it was a league of governments, and that it ought to be a league of peoples. On the matter of basic philosophy and program, there was again a clash between Gompers and the other delegates. Over his opposition, the Congress voted that capitalism was impotent to reorganize production in such a way as to insure the well-being of the masses of the people and called for " complete trade-union organization as the necessary basis for the realization of the socialization of the means of production." [2]

Finally there were disputes over the matter of dues and rules of organization. Gompers thought the dues too high. But what was especially irksome to him was that the Congress voted that its decisions should be binding upon the various trade-union centers, even when these decisions were passed by majority vote, and not by a unanimous one as had been the case before the war. Thus the Interna-

[1] International Federation of Trade Unions, *Proceedings, Amsterdam Conference*, 1919.

[2] *Ibid.*

tional Federation of Trade Unions refused adherence to that principle of voluntarism which was the keynote of the American Federation of Labor, and which, above all other principles, Gompers held dear.

Gompers and the other American delegates returned from Amsterdam not entirely pleased with the turn of developments, and somewhat dissatisfied with the reconstituted I. F. T. U. His own dissatisfaction and that of the Executive Council was increased, too, in the following year or so, by certain of the radical activities of the International body. Thus, in 1919, it called upon the trade unions for action to end the blockade of Soviet Russia. In the following year, it undertook, through its constituent unions, to carry on a boycott of Hungary, because of the reactionary Horthy regime. In the same year, and as a way of ending the Polish-Russian war, it called upon all trade unionists to refuse to handle arms and munitions bound for Poland. Finally, during this period, it issued a number of what in the eyes of Gompers were decidedly radical pronouncements. For instance, its May Day Proclamation called for a general strike to achieve the socialization of the means of production, and ended with: "Down with Reaction!" "Up with Socialism!"[1] At any time these activities and pronouncements would have been annoying to Gompers. At this time, fighting as he was to stem the rising tide of radicalism in the American labor movement, they were especially so.

Gompers' protests against these activities and pronouncements and his correspondence with the International Federation's leaders in regard to the other specific grievances of the A. F. of L., namely, the lack of autonomy for each trade-union center, and the excessively high dues, netted him no satisfaction. In fact, all the attempts made to settle the differences between the two bodies seemed but to drive them apart.

[1] Lorwin, *op. cit.*, pp. 202-7, 253-5.

By December 1920 Gompers had reached the point where he held the opinion that "the I. F. T. U. (had) become an international political body with sovietism as its logical result and a revolutionary program for 'socialization' and 'communism' ".[1] Shortly after, in March 1921, the Executive Council announced its definite withdrawal from the Amsterdam Federation.[2]

PAN-AMERICAN LABOR

Although devoted to the American labor movement and naturally holding its interests paramount, Gompers nevertheless found time to interest himself in, and tried to help along, as best he could, the struggle of labor elsewhere for freedom and betterment. To Cuban, Porto-Rican and Mexican labor his aid was of material service.

Gompers first came into contact with the labor struggles of the above countries back in his cigarmaking days, when workers of these countries were among his shopmates. As head of the American labor movement he maintained this sympa-

[1] Letter to W. A. Appleton, President of the British Federation of Trade Unions. Quoted in Lorwin, p. 265.

[2] During 1923-4 Gompers made a number of moves to bring about more friendly relationships between Amsterdam and the A. F. of L. and to see if a way could not be found for resumption of affiliation by his organization. Speaking of these efforts, Miss Florence Thorne, research secretary of the Federation, in her Epilogue to Gompers' autobiography, indicates that Gompers was less willing than his colleagues on the E. C. to withdraw from the Amsterdam Federation. She quotes him as saying: "When I am gone I want someone to do me the justice to let the world know that I was never in entire accord with my colleagues upon withdrawal from the International Federation of Trade Unions. I know they were right in the objections they made against certain acts of the International. I have written as directed but believed we could have met our difficulties in another way—from within. I believed that our American labor movement owed the same obligation to other national centers that other trade-union organizations owed to our Federation—to help the less progressive to elevate their standards." Vol. ii, p. 543.

thetic attitude, and cultivated in the Federation a concern for and a wish to aid the labor movements of these countries.

In 1896, the Federation endorsed the demands of the Cuban revolutionists, and after the Spanish-American War protested against threatened American imperialistic designs. In the case of Porto Rico, the Federation, led by Gompers, hearing that conditions were oppressive under American military rule, began in 1900 a campaign for free speech, free press and other civil rights. A few years later Gompers himself visited the island, and did his best to better conditions by informing the American people of existing abuses.

Gompers' relations with the Mexican movement were more extensive and important. Having come into contact with the Mexican revolutionaries in his shop days, he kept in touch with these people, thereafter, and they used often to consult with him in regard to their plans.[1] Perhaps his first important service to their cause was when he endeavored to prevent the extradition of Mexican political refugees. "It is not in any way an exaggeration", he writes, "to say that the American labor movement was the most potent single agency in inducing President Roosevelt and President Taft to refuse to permit the United States government to hunt Mexican refugees."[2] Along with John Murray, Gompers succeeded in winning the American Federation of Labor to the cause of the Mexican revolutionary movement. Accordingly, when the revolution against Diaz occurred in 1910, the Federation moved to prevent American intervention. Later, when Carranza appeared on the scene and received the backing of Mexican labor, Gompers supported him and helped persuade Wilson to recognize his government. As a result of all this Gompers personally came to possess considerable

[1] Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, vol. ii, pp. 303-310.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 309.

weight in Mexican-American relations and in Mexican internal affairs.[1] His influence with Carranza he exerted so as to have the latter carry out the land distribution and other reforms.[2]

From 1914 on, the relations between the Mexican and American movements steadily became more friendly and cooperative.[1] On its side, the Mexican movement, washed over by the post-war wave of radicalism, became, after 1921, less radical and more in tune with the philosophy of the American movement. On the other hand, Gompers continued to lend his aid and support to the Mexican movement. Thus, he gave his support to both Obregon and Calles in their campaigns for the presidency. In 1923, when the Obregon government found itself faced with the Huerta revolt, Gompers urged the American government to see that the law against transporting arms into Mexico during wartime was enforced, and appealed to American unionists to aid in stopping gun-running into Mexico.

Because of this cooperation, to repeat, Mexican and American labor drew closer together. The joint sessions of the Mexican and American Federations of Labor held with great enthusiasm at the border in 1924 were both a demonstration and a celebration of this cordiality which had come to exist between the two movements. To Gompers, sensing that he had not long to live, it must have been a comforting—to

[1] How considerable this influence was the following incident shows. In 1916 some American soldiers who had crossed the border were arrested by Mexican forces. The affair brought American-Mexican relations, already tense, to a crisis. After a conference with Mexican labor leaders who had come to him asking that he request Wilson to withdraw the American forces, Gompers on his own responsibility wired to Carranza, asking him to release the American soldiers. Carranza immediately acceded to this request and informed only Gompers—not the Department of State—of his action.

[2] Tannenbaum, Frank, *The Mexican Agrarian Revolution* (New York, 1929), p. 166.

his religious nature, almost a holy—thought that these last days of his witnessed and cemented this great friendship between the two movements, a friendship brought about largely by his efforts, and one which would exercise a potent influence for peace between the two nations.

THE PAN-AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR

It was from the springboard of the American-Mexican labor alliance that Gompers made his essay to bring about a federation of the labor movements of the American hemisphere.

At the beginning of the war, as has already been pointed out, the Federation was moving towards a more extensive participation in the international affairs of labor. The war, temporarily frustrating activity on the larger stage, shunted Gompers' interests to the western hemisphere, and made him more conscious of the Federation's relation or lack of relation to the labor movements of most of the countries to the south. The government, too, at this time was emphasizing Pan-Americanism, and that influenced labor to tread the same road. Accordingly, in 1915 Gompers proposed to the convention of that year that the Executive Council be instructed to take steps towards a unification of Pan-American labor.

It may be inquired what Gompers' motives were. First and most important was his hope that a Pan-American Labor Federation would be an important factor in making for peace among the various nations. Secondly, there was his wish to provide the labor movements of the Latin American countries with "constructive leadership", to get them to model their movements upon the American Federation of Labor, and to wean them from the radical philosophies to which they then held. He hoped also that through a Pan-American Federation of Labor, the workers to the south might be more thoroughly organized. Finally there was another reason,

one interwoven with the others, and of which Gompers was perhaps not fully conscious, namely, an ambition to extend his power and influence, to be leader of labor in all the Americas, even if not of all the world.

During the following years, Gompers worked, collaborating closely with Mexican labor, to lay the foundations for the desired union of Pan-American labor. The entrance of the United States into the war stimulated and helped along his activities. For then Gompers believed there was a necessity for creating sentiment favorable to the allied cause among the Latin-American countries, and saw in a Pan-American labor organization an instrument for achieving that end. He persuaded President Wilson to this point of view, and the latter then aided the project by appropriating from special government funds money for propaganda purposes.

It was not until later in 1918 that Gompers' activities began to show returns. On November 13th of that year, a conference of delegates from the various countries met in Laredo, Texas, and this conference became the first Congress of the Pan-American Federation of Labor.

During the next six years, Gompers tried to nurse along to taller stature the infant organization thus established, but, on the whole, without conspicuous success. True, relations with Mexico became ever more friendly, but the South American movements, too remote in distance and in thought, seemed to draw closer to Europe and " Amsterdam " than to Gompers and the American Federation of Labor. Thus, the alliance with Mexican labor was all that Gompers had to console him for the failure of his larger plans.

CHAPTER IX

Conclusion

When Gompers, young, incredibly energetic, a realist, a born organizer and leader of men, first came into contact with the American Labor movement in the early seventies, the movement was in a formative, experimental stage. Gompers at first was a socialist. But the impossible tactics of the socialists, their obsession with political action, their indifference to trade unionism and their emphasis upon ultimate ends, contrived to drive him away from that philosophy. He became a trade unionist, pure and simple, and as the skilled workers in this country were turning towards trade unionism to secure better wages and hours, made himself one of their leaders.

He was among those pioneers who discovered and developed those principles and policies which served as the basis of the movement's existence and growth. Trade unionism, attention to immediate gains, indifference to ultimate ends, action upon the economic field, craft autonomy, —these constituted their formula for meeting the difficulties besetting the rise of a labor movement in this country. Looking back, one sees clearly the soundness of that formula. On no other ideological base could a stable labor movement have developed in this country at that time. The Knights of Labor, the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance, the American Labor Union, the Industrial Workers of the World—the failures of all these movements "that have ceased to move" prove the unfitness, the untimeliness of

their philosophies for the American labor scene, and in the same degree prove the essential soundness for their time and place of the principles upon which the American Federation of Labor was founded.

Gompers, having participated in the developing of the right ideological basis, helped build the American labor movement upon that basis. In this work of pioneer construction, performed in the eighties, nineties and the first decade of the twentieth century, lie Gompers' major claims to greatness.

Gompers was an artist at handling men, at building and leading human organizations. Born under other circumstances than those which welded him to the working class, he might have become the head of a great corporation, or a great general, or the boss of a political machine. There was something that he loved about a functioning human organization. He was willing to leave others to play the role of opposition and critic. He wanted to be on the inside, to be at the helm, to administer, to build.

After he had helped make over the cigarmakers' union into a strong and stable body, Gompers played a leading part in the establishment of the Federation, of which he became the head. But the Federation in 1886 existed only on paper. The new body had no substance; it possessed no sense of solidarity; it had no traditions of existence and procedure. It was the loosest sort of federation—a federation of unions each jealous of its sovereignty—and formed by them so as to preserve that sovereignty against the encroachments of the Knights of Labor. To build up this organization, to get the unions to affiliate and to stay affiliated, to get them to cooperate with one another, to cultivate a sense of unity, to make the Federation count for something, these were the tasks that lay before Gompers. And he performed them well.

Further, in those early days, Gompers as president of the Federation was a sort of organizer at large for the movement. The list of unions that Gompers helped to organize is long. He organized local unions, helped bring these locals together into national organizations, and brought these national unions into the Federation. Into one crucial situation after another he plunged, organizing, helping conduct strikes, counseling officials. He was short on theory and criticism, and long on practice and work. With the spirit of a crusader, imbued with a flaming idealism, he slowly and perseveringly helped build a trade-union movement. It was not perfect, but it existed and functioned. So much for Gompers' great service to the American labor movement.

For a time, as a trade unionist, pure and simple, Gompers was tolerant of socialism. But gradually as a result of the criticism of the socialists and their attempts (some of them most foolhardy) to break the Federation, Gompers reacted to a position of most extreme hatred for them and their entire program. Thereafter he did all in his power to prevent the movement from adopting a socialist philosophy.

The post-war years witnessed an extension of Gompers' old program of strict business unionism. Labor's stake in increasing production was recognized, as was the necessity of making unionism more palatable to employers. Accordingly Gompers in company with other Federation leaders became an advocate of union-management cooperation, a practice already entered upon by several of the more forward-looking unions. At the same time, Gompers posed a new goal for the labor movement, namely, participation in the management and control of industry. Along with the voicing of this new aspiration, he criticized the running of industry for private profit and asked that industry subordinate profit-making to social service.

By thus taking up these new ideals, Gompers at the very

end of his career swung around nearer, in one sense at least, to the philosophy which he held at the very beginning of his trade-union life. The new program pointed in the direction of socialism. More exactly, it pointed in the direction of guild socialism, for to the last Gompers abhorred giving more power to the political state. Indeed the very Manifesto in which Gompers declared labor's new aims is filled with phrases decrying the interference of the state in economic affairs.

So far as the development of Gompers' own ideas is concerned, this reorientation of his is interesting. But from the point of view of the effect of the new ideas and ideals upon the movement, it does not possess great significance. Essentially the new aims were radical, but Gompers set them forth in mild language, quite devoid of pugnacity. Also the new program was developed in connection with a conviction then held that the hired managers of industry would undergo a moral regeneration, run industry for the benefit of society and offer labor industrial democracy as a gift. The effect of these factors was to give Gompers' new aims more of the character of a prophecy than of a fighting faith. By setting forth labor's new aspirations with such absence of belliocosity, Gompers robbed them of substance. There is some evidence that the movement is expanding its old program, is becoming conscious of an aspiration to participate in the management and control of industry. But Gompers was too old, too physically spent to have been able to lead the movement down this new road.

The dominating feature of Gompers' social philosophy was his belief in laissez faire or individualism, as he called it, voluntarism. He came to hold this belief chiefly by way of reaction from and hatred of socialism. Another major factor was the lack of sympathy shown by the state to the labor movement. In other words, the doctrine was his de-

fence mechanism against the political impotence of the Federation.

Gompers' individualism was the individualism of Herbert Spencer. But whereas for Spencer the individual was the atom in his atomistic society, the basic unit in Gompers' individualism was sometimes the individual but more often the organized group. Life he thought of as a struggle for survival; society was but a name denoting struggling groups. Each group cares only for its own interests, fights to advance those interests and lets the devil take the hindmost. Groups meet in battle in the market place. Here groups of workers sell and employers buy labor, and each participant strives to drive the hardest bargain. With this traffic organized society should have nothing to do, except to allow the contestants the fullest liberty of contract. Organized labor and its relationships to employers should be, as a general rule, entirely without the jurisdiction of the state. The labor movement should confine its demands for social legislation to the minimum. State health insurance, unemployment insurance and old age pensions were instances of state paternalism, and consequently bad. At all costs individuals should maintain their liberty and independence, and "help themselves."

Of course, he was not absolutely consistent in his advocacy of this philosophy. When various organizations pressed for the legal enactment of desired conditions, or when he himself, as in the case of immigration restriction, saw that positive benefits could be secured through legislation, he did not hesitate to make use of the state. But these instances were exceptions to the general rule and were to be limited as far as possible.

These same principles of self help and individualism applied within the movement. In fighting socialism as a philosophy for the movement, Gompers was fighting a con-

ception which would have helped to unify the movement. The victory of "no philosophy" and later, "voluntarism" over socialism signalized the victory of separatism over solidarity within the movement. For "no philosophy" meant no common aim or end for the movement as a whole. By so much, therefore, it meant the lack of a tie to hold the various groups together. "No philosophy" and "voluntarism" within the movement meant simply trade autonomy and bolstered that doctrine as the cardinal principle of the Federation. This latter principle meant nothing more or less than the right and duty of each trade to go its own way, to look out for itself, to fight its own battles, to solve its own problems in its own way, and to let other groups do the same. An injury to one is not an injury to all. If other working class groups are unable to press their own interests successfully, so much the worse for them. Jurisdictional disputes, restriction of members, sectionalism in politics, the absence of common policies and procedures in the face of common problems, no generalizations, these are all the natural corollaries of this principle. Holding to this principle, the movement in this country has hardly merited the title movement; it has been simply a congeries of groups.

Now Gompers' philosophy of individualism was congenial to the unions within the Federation, else they would not have permitted him for so long to have been their leader and spokesman. Self help is a slogan useful to those who are on top. Individualism is a philosophy espoused, at least under present conditions, by economic aristocrats. And from its foundation to the present day, the American Federation of Labor has been representative of an aristocracy of labor.

The very formation of the Federation was the result of a secession movement, a splitting-off of the more favorably situated groups of workers from the rest. In effect, the

skilled trades decided that they could do better for themselves by going it alone, and by disassociating themselves from the unskilled. When the Knights of Labor with their proud motto of solidarity came tumbling down in the latter eighties, the skilled trades marshaled themselves into the Federation, under the banner of "*Sauve qui peut.*"

The Federation has retained the character it possessed at the beginning. The organizations affiliated with it have never included more than 17 or 18 percent of the entire wage-earning class. These organizations have displayed little zeal in extending unionism among the remainder of the workers, and rather more in the decade and a half following upon the foundation of the Federation than afterwards. In fact, in one strike after another, so marked has been the desertion of the unskilled by the skilled, organized workers, that among considerable sections of the unskilled workers the mention of the American Federation of Labor is an occasion for booing and hissing.

The policies followed by the organizations within the Federation have all been of a nature designed to benefit themselves, without regard to their effect upon the rest of the working class. Take the Federation's repugnance to hour and wage legislation. Obviously such legislation would be highly appreciated by the worst-off sections of the workers, and even by some groups within the Federation. But the Federation has been dominated very largely by the building and printing trades and to these groups such legislation would be of no benefit, since it would enact standards far below what they have already obtained. Motivated solely or largely by their self-interest, it is not to be expected that such groups would care about pushing legislation that could be beneficial only to others.

The same factors explain the Federation's indifference to social insurance and old age pensions, and the acquiescence

by the rank and file members in the decisions of Gompers and other leaders to avoid these measures. Comparatively well off, the groups that dominate the Federation have not felt any urgent need for this legislation. Or at any rate the need of this sort of legislation was not sufficiently urgent to cause them to overthrow the administration's policy.

These identical factors apply also in the case of government ownership of industries. To the skilled groups who have secured from their private employers better wages and hours than obtain in government employment, such employment does not appear attractive, whereas for the unskilled workers government employment would be a step upwards. In general socialism as a philosophy had and has little appeal to the aristocratic, exclusive craft groups that dominate the Federation.

On the whole, therefore, the Federation's policies reflect the character and position of the groups that compose it, and Gompers' ideas, in turn, were essentially in tune with the ideas of the dominant groups in the Federation. From this angle, it is seen that it is idle to expect the Federation to alter drastically its present philosophy unless there is a change in its makeup due to the infiltration of workers from lower strata of the working class, or unless the groups now dominant in the Federation are themselves changed in their character due to inability to maintain a superior position over other groups of workers. And it may confidently be expected that when, as and if, workers from the lower strata of the working class organize and enter the ranks of the Federation, the Federation will swing to the left and adopt a more radical program.

To what extent did Gompers lead the movement? To what extent did he as leader influence its ideas and policies? These questions have been partly answered in the paragraphs above. A more complete answer rests upon the following

factors. By nature Gompers was primarily an organizer, a leader of men in action, not a philosopher. His leadership was not a leadership in ideas. He was not one to take hold of new, unpopular ideas and to convert the movement to those ideas. Rather his leadership was a leadership in tactics, a leadership in the day-to-day activities of the movement. As a leader followers were necessary to him, and he hesitated ever to separate himself from his followers. Now above all else Gompers wanted to remain president of the American Federation of Labor. This is not to suggest for a moment that Gompers in his own eyes was unidealistic, that he put his own personal career above the welfare of the movement. Quite the contrary. No man could have been more idealistic. He devoted his life to the movement, in the early days went through privation and poverty for it. He would have made any sacrifice to advance the cause of labor. But he had come to identify himself with the movement, to believe that his hands were the hands preeminently fitted for molding its destiny, that the Federation could suffer no greater loss than to lose him as its leader. And being a very practical man, he built up a machine to hold him in office concerning whose strength and effectiveness one leader remarked that "it beat anything in the American Federation of Labor." The Federation was and is a very political body. Often Gompers, in following the star of his ideal, had to walk through mud.

Now Gompers knew that to keep the presidency it was necessary for him to be close in his ideas to the key men in the Federation whose votes controlled the presidency, and that meant that he had to be fairly close to the ideas of the rank and file of the movement. He had to conform to the movement. He could advocate only ideas that were not too far in advance nor too far in the rear of the then present mind of the Federation. As the movement changed its policies,

he had to go along. And Gompers did this. In one instance after another he compromised, kept the headship of the Federation by leading it in directions that he personally did not wish to see it go. Really there were few of Gompers policies that he would not have sacrificed in order to retain the leadership of the movement. In part, Gompers' leadership, especially after 1900, was an exercise in listening ear to the ground for the prevailing trends of sentiment within the Federation, and then having discovered where the movement was going, "making a hop, skip and jump" and placing himself at its head. As leader of the movement he was its mouthpiece and weathervane.

But only in part. Gompers did believe firmly in the rightness of certain policies and he fought to impress these policies upon the movement. Certain of these policies were progressive. He believed in the extension of organization to all workers. He used his influence to get the unions to drop their restrictive rules and admit women and unskilled workers. Others were reactionary. In counselling individualism, the avoidance of legislation in regard to wages, hours, and social insurance, Gompers did grave harm to the movement. The effect of Gompers' teaching in this respect was to help cause labor to be, politically, a nonentity. While labor has spared using the state to gain its ends, other social groups have not hesitated to make use of it. In counselling avoidance of social insurance, Gompers left the way open for employers' "welfarism," group insurance, old-age pensions, etc. Thus instead of state paternalism there is the paternalism of the employers, and the effect has been to strengthen the employers and to weaken the unions. Finally, in other, more important matters, Gompers simply drifted along with the movement. From, say, 1900 on the movement has been entering an industrial environment very different from that in which the craft unions of the United States were formed.

Larger and larger aggregations of capital, consolidation among the ranks of the employers, the increasing mechanization of industry, obliteration of craft skills, continuous technical innovation, employers' welfarism — these are the difficulties which the trade-union movement must meet, if it is to continue to exist, let alone grow. In the face of these difficulties Gompers showed no constructive leadership. Towards the very first steps in a program to meet these difficulties, a shift in the basis of organization from craft to industry, and closer consolidation of the movement, Gompers was indifferent, not to say hostile. In the last two or three years of his life Gompers wrote his autobiography. In it he discussed the rise of the trade-union movement, its trials, its "true" and "wise" policies, and the role that he had played. But in all its many pages, one finds not the slightest awareness on Gompers' part of the problems which the increased mechanization of industry and the concomitant developments of the twentieth century had raised for the craft unionism of the Federation.

Gompers came to the labor movement at the beginning of an epoch. He helped discover the policies and principles that were right and good for that epoch, and led in building the movement upon those policies and principles. Then the movement passed into a new epoch. But Gompers never recognized that the new epoch had arrived.

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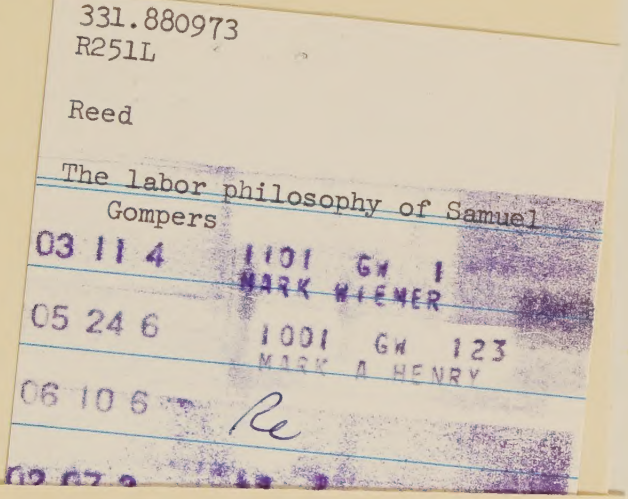
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